Stumbled Beginnings

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Stumbled Beginnings

by vix_spes

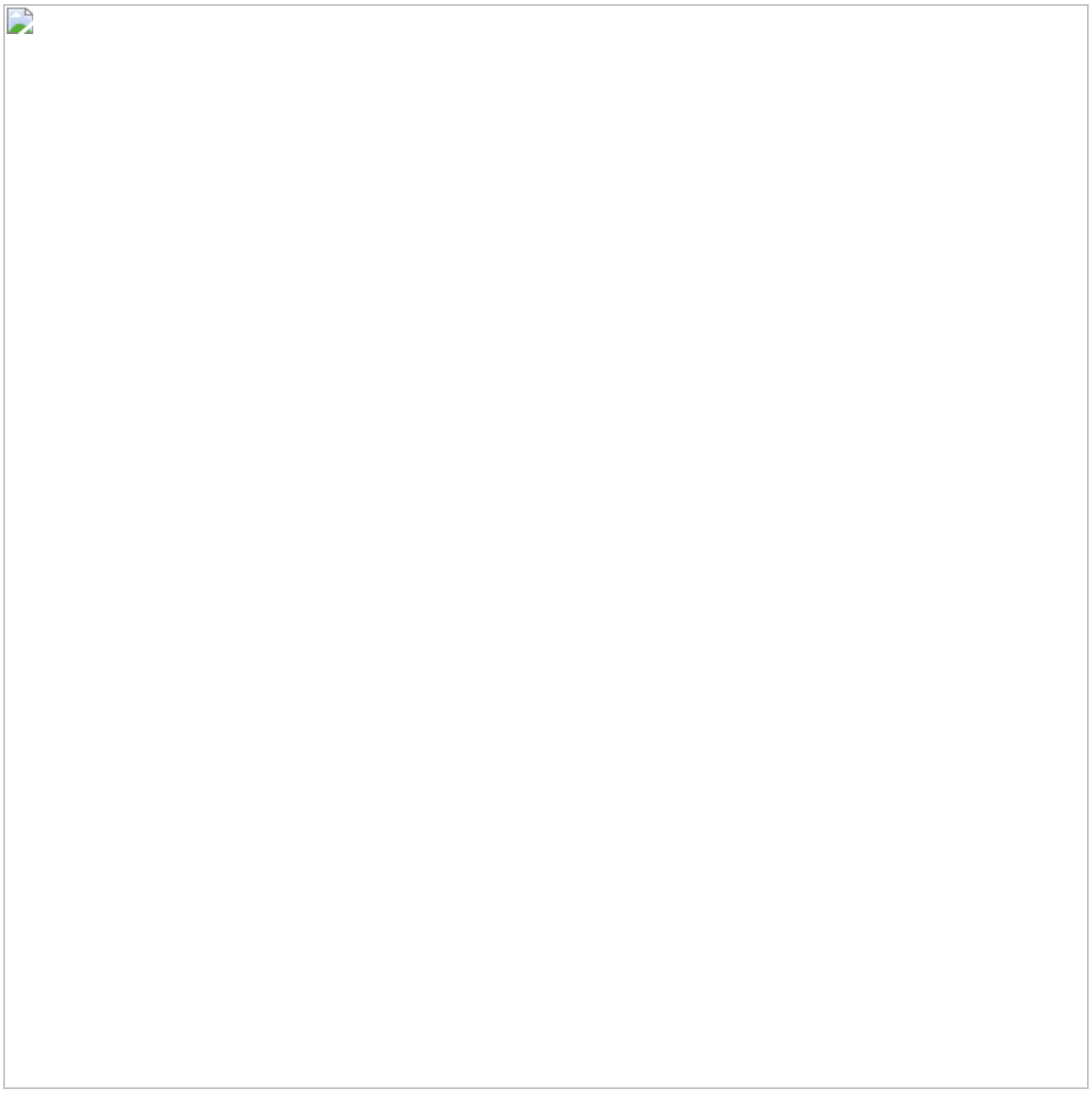
Summary

Swan Lake and the role of Prince Siegfried are things that lead danseur Will Graham is used to. But hallucinations, an all-male corps of swans and Hannibal Lecter as his Swan? Well, that's something entirely new.

Notes

In January, I went to see a performance of Matthew Bourne's all-male Swan Lake and fell in love. Around the same time, the lovely Bea drew this gorgeous art of Mads as the Swan and I knew that I had to write something for it. Thankfully, Bea was a sweetheart and let me write this, so this is for them ♥

Prologue



The problem with making your debut as the Prince in one of the worlds' most well-known and well-loved ballets so young was that you got to the point where you needed something new and different far quicker than normal.

So, it was the case with Will Graham.

He had made his debut as Prince Siegfried, the leading male from Swan Lake, at the age of twenty. In doing so, he had skipped eight years in the corps de ballet, become a little unpopular with some members in the company and gained notice by every single ballet critic and fan in the country. One of the most frequent comments had been whether his movie idol

good looks would eclipse his dancing abilities. Another debate had been whether he would rise to the challenge or crumble under the pressure. Opinions had pretty much been divided down the middle prior to opening night.

When the reviews came in after opening night, all of those that had doubted him had been forced to eat their words. Every single review, from both critics and audience members alike, had raved about both Will and his Odette/Odile. Getting towards the end of her career, one reviewed stated that Bella Crawford 'was a prima ballerina reborn in Will Graham's arms'.

As the wife of the company director, Bella was under more scrutiny than anyone else for signs of favouritism, but she would be the first to admit that she was fast approaching the twilight of her career and that things weren't as easy as they had once been. Her arabesque was getting harder to maintain and the prospect of Odile's infamous thirty-two fouettés in act three filled her with dread. But Jack needed a safe pair of hands for his newest Siegfried and Bella was his first choice.

Will couldn't have been more grateful. Bella made the whole experience far more pleasant. Where Jack shouted and railed, his stress levels ever rising, Bella was the epitome of elegance, constantly radiating calm confidence in everything. She had put Will at ease throughout the rehearsal process and, during their first performance, had even snuck them a surreptitious and illicit glass of champagne before they went on stage for act three. There had been comparisons to Fonteyn and Nureyev, with Bella becoming Will's regular partner until she finally retired in her mid-forties, three years after their debut together. For that reason, as well as others, Swan Lake and Siegfried would always be special for Will.

The problem was, Will's debut as Siegfried had been nine years ago. Since then, he had played every single major leading role for a man in the classical repertoire including Siegfried on practically every continent and in a number of different versions. He had done most of the contemporary rep that traditional companies did, had had ballets and roles created on him and he was bored.

He felt bad about that, but it was the honest truth. Jack Crawford – the director of the company – had been good to Will over the years. Yes, he had screamed and shouted, pushing Will to his limits and even to the edge a few times, but that was pretty standard practice amongst the industry. Yet, regardless of the fact that Jack had been good Will, had given him his first job in fact, it didn't change the fact that Will was bored. He didn't want to leave the company, but he needed a challenge, something to sink his teeth into.

And then, as if the Fates had decided to intervene, Will received a phone call from one Jimmy Price.

Will had heard of him, of course. Jimmy had danced with Jack's company for a number of years but had left the summer before Will joined to form his own all-male company. It had been something of a scandal at the time, not least because his new company had been funded by one of the major donors of Jack's company, one Mrs Komeda. What Will couldn't quite believe was that Jimmy wanted to talk to him. Wanted him for his next production.

It was the kind of phone call that dreams were made of.

They were doing a revival of Jimmy's infamous (and slightly controversial) production of Swan Lake with its corps of male swans. More than that, they wanted Will to play the Prince. The more Will listened, the more excited he got. It was the most excited that he had been about a project in a long time. Yes, it was playing Siegfried again, but this was going to be completely different. Jimmy was talking about making major revisions to the plot in act three and removing a subplot that he'd never been totally convinced by. In doing so, it also made the identity of The Stranger even more vague. Will barely waited until Jimmy had finished speaking before he was saying yes, blushing as Jimmy chuckled.

"Saying yes already? Don't you want to know who your Swan/Stranger is going to be?"

"Oh, yeah. Um…" Will wracked his brain, trying to think of who Jimmy would have offered the role to. Who had he made the role of the Swan on back in the day? And then Will remembered that it had been created for Francis Dolarhyde, a powerful contemporary dancer who had tragically died in a house fire with his girlfriend not too many years after the production had premiered. He tuned back into the conversation just as Jimmy named his Swan.

"And we've managed to get Hannibal Lecter to play the Swan/Stranger."

Will's phone dropped from nerveless fingers and landed on the floor with a clatter. Hannibal Lecter. How had they managed to get him? How was Will supposed to dance with him? And then he remembered that Jimmy was still on the other end of the phone and hurried to pick it up.

"Will … Will? Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, sorry. Dropped my phone."

"Okay. Well, look, I can't tell you how happy I am to have to you onboard. You're perfect for the Prince and I think you and Hannibal will be fantastic together. I'll contact Jack to discuss releasing you from the company temporarily and then I'll be in touch in a couple of days."

Will was numb as he hung up. It wasn't that he didn't want to dance with Hannibal. It was more that Will didn't feel like he could dance with Hannibal and not look like an idiot. Like many young dancers, Will had idolised Hannibal – although he'd never seen him perform live – and had also had something of a crush on the man. And now, Will was going to be partnering him. And not just that but fall in love and be seduced by him on stage.

It was definitely an inspired casting choice. Lecter may be old for a male dancer now – in his late thirties/early forties – but he was the perfect type of dancer to play the dual role of the Swan/the Stranger. He'd certainly had a completely different career trajectory to Will. While Will had undergone a classical ballet education and career, Lecter had studied classical ballet and then moved into the world of contemporary dance, specialising in the works of Martha Graham. Making himself a coffee, Will grabbed his laptop and retreated to the sofa, typing Hannibal Lecter into the search bar and selecting videos.

One thing that became immediately apparent was that it was going to be no hardship whatsoever being seduced by Hannibal. The man was utterly gorgeous; all ridiculous

cheekbones, broad shoulders and veritable pelt of chest hair. The latter was perhaps not what you'd expect of a male swan – Will guessed that his own hairless chest was the more common aesthetic – but Will liked it. There was a leonine grace to his dancing, but an undeniable power and Will could see, without a shadow of a doubt, why Jimmy had cast him. Between the two of them, they'd definitely be good for the box office sales.

The only problem that Will could foresee? It had become very obvious, during the course of his search, that Will's youthful crush on Hannibal Lecter could no longer be consigned to the past; it was very much still evident. How the hell was he supposed to dance with him, be seduced by him and keep it professional? Not react? Even now, Will's cock was at full attention in his sweatpants and that was just from some bloody videos. How was he going to react to having the flesh and blood man in front of him, pressed up against him?

Maybe he could get it out of his system before rehearsals started. Sliding his hand into his sweatpants and wrapping it around his cock, Will bit his lip and pressed play one more time.

It was worth a try. Right?

Act One

It didn't matter that Will had been dancing almost since he was old enough to walk, he was still susceptible to nerves. Every artist was. It didn't matter if they were at the top of their game, at the end of the day they were still human and thus subject to human emotions. Besides, a bit of nerves were good; they got the adrenaline flowing.

It was his first day of rehearsals for Jimmy Price's Swan Lake and Will was currently stood outside the large warehouse that had been hired as the rehearsal venue trying to pluck up the courage to open the door. Will was berating himself for being ridiculous; he had guested with companies all over the world and he had never been this nervous. There was always a bit of trepidation; would you remember the right steps for the production you were doing, would you fall flat on your ass and make a fool of yourself in front of everyone. But, it wasn't normally this bad.

Focusing on his breathing, Will tried to break it down as to why his nerves were off the charts. It wasn't the steps. He knew that without a doubt. True to his word, Jimmy had spoken to Jack and arranged to release Will from the company temporarily. So, for the last few months, Will had been juggling rehearsals and performances with the company during the day and evenings, fitting in this new version of Swan Lake in whatever downtime he had. Jimmy had sent over the music as his version used the original score in a slightly different order, videos of the original production during both rehearsals and performance as well as the Benesh Movement Notation scores so that Will could get the choreography down. There would be some things that would change, some extra choreography to learn, but most of that could be done in the studio. The important thing was that Will knew pretty much what he was doing and – hopefully – didn't make a fool of himself.

It wasn't even all of the new people that he would be meeting that had Will apprehensive. He wasn't the most sociable of people, but that was well-known and accepted by the other dancers in the company. It wasn't that he disliked them or thought himself better than them, he just preferred his own company and that of his dogs. He was perfectly capable of being polite and conversing with his colleagues, but they all knew that when they went out to a bar, Will would join them once in a blue moon. Still, he had good relationships with most of the dancers. He was just closer to a select few. Or, at least, he had been.

In truth, Will taking this role couldn't have come at a more fortuitous time. The last time that he had gone out with some of the other principals, he had ended up drinking a bit too much and kissed his partner, Alana. It hadn't been the best idea that they had ever had, and they had both regretted it, meaning that, while they had carried on as the professionals that they were, things had been a little awkward in past weeks. Particularly as they were in the middle of a run of tutu ballets and having to fall in love onstage every night.

That only left one reason as to why Will was cowering outside the door; the prospect of dancing with Hannibal Lecter.

Contrary to his hopes, Will had not been able to get Hannibal Lecter out of his system. Far from it. Instead, he had descended into some kind of black hole. Not just watching as many videos of Hannibal dancing or reading as many interviews as possible, but masturbating over him, be it videos of him dancing or the fact that Hannibal had become the fantasy that Will wanked to. And then there were the increasingly vivid dreams Will had started having. Dreams where he was doing considerably more than just dancing with Hannibal.

He tried to justify it. There was more than an element of professional curiosity. He had never danced a pas de deux with a man before. Will had spent his entire dancing career partnering women and, essentially, playing the dominant role in the partnership. Yes, he had his share of show-off codas and variations, but a significant part of his job was to make his ballerina look good. That wasn't the case with this. In several sections of the ballet, it would be Will taking the traditionally feminine role. He told himself that he was watching those videos to see what kind of a partner Hannibal was. Surprise, surprise a really bloody good one; steady as a rock and considerate. In truth, Will spent just as much time admiring Hannibal's broad chest, the musculature of his arms and his surprisingly skinny legs.

Yes, it was safe to say that Will's crush on Hannibal Lecter was stronger than ever. Maybe even a bit of a competency kink.

And then it just went way beyond the realms of research. He was now more in the realms of perpetually horny teenage boy. It was as though his body had been rewired so that any time he saw Hannibal, he got hard. Fuck knows what was going to happen the first time that he and Hannibal held hands; Will would probably spontaneously combust. He'd almost definitely get an erection. Good job he'd packed the dancer’s belt that was just that bit on the small side.

Will was pulled out of his thoughts by a piercing wolf-whistle.

“Hey, hot stuff! You going in or just planning on blocking the door all day?”

Will turned to see a woman in close-fitting jeans, knee high boots and a burgundy leather jacket approaching, an overstuffed tote slung over one shoulder. There was an unrepentant grin curving her lips and an unmistakable look of mischief in her eyes as she pushed her aviators up to perch on her head.

“I mean, I'm not complaining about the view.” The woman tilted her head as though it would help her see Will's ass again. “It's a very nice view but still, it would help rehearsals if dancers could get in the building.”

“Do you always talk like that to people you've never met?”

“Pretty much. I mean, I can call you other things if you prefer. Studmuffin? Cher? Sassy little beignet?”

“Sassy little beignet?!” Will honestly couldn't decide if he was amused or offended.

“Well, you look like you're a cinnamon roll, but I've heard a couple of stories, so yeah… besides, you're from the South, aren't you?”

“Yes, but I'm also a human, not a pastry.”

“I see little difference.”

“Again, you talk to everyone like this when you first meet them?”

“Would it make you feel better if I said you're just special? Nah, I’m like this most of the time. I'm just getting into character early. It's my job to harass you for the next few months.” The woman held out her hand to shake, “Bev Katz. I'm going to be your girlfriend.”

Will froze momentarily before he clocked that she meant in the ballet; this was the dancer who had been cast as the Prince’s girlfriend. He chuckled awkwardly and shook her hand. “Will Graham, nice to meet you.”

“Trust me, I know who you are. Pleasure’s all mine. So, Will Graham, you gonna stand here all day or are you coming in? Kinda difficult for us to rehearse without our Prince.”

Will threw his shoulders back and adjusted the strap of his bag, pulling the door open and gesturing for Bev to precede him. “Lead the way.”

(~*~)

Inside, the room was pretty busy with dancers dressed in a mishmash of clothes warming up. The room was clearly divided into those who knew each other and had worked with each other before, and those who didn't know anyone and looked slightly awkward and uncomfortable. Bev, it seemed, knew almost everyone in the room it seemed. People converged on her to say hello, exchange hugs and kisses and the obligatory bit of gossip. All the while, Will just stood there awkwardly, very aware of the curious glances angled his way and wishing that the earth would just open up and swallow him whole. And then, to his relief, two familiar faces walked into the room and spotted him, saving him.

Even now, ten years after he left the company, Jimmy Price was still instantly recognisable to Will, as was his scowling companion, Brian Zeller. Zeller had also danced for Jack's company and the two of them had been in a relationship for years, but he had left Jack to be Jimmy’s lead danseur. Both men had been first soloists, with Brian doing some solo roles, but those had been few and far between even before the company had hired Will. Thus, they had decided to create their own opportunities elsewhere. It had been Brian Zeller whom the original role of the Prince had been made on. In doing his research for the role, Will had discovered that apparently the working relationship between Zeller and Francis Dolarhyde had been so bad that the show had almost been written off as a disaster before it even premiered.

Will didn’t know Zeller well - at all, really - but just from the way that the guy was looking at him as they drew closer, Will had the feeling that it was going to be a bumpy ride. It had to be difficult for the guy; this was a role that he had originated, but it was being revamped, improved upon and he wasn’t going to get to dance it, he had to teach it instead. He certainly didn’t look thrilled at the prospect but maybe that was just his face. That, or he’d chewed on a wasp. Jimmy, on the other hand, was pure ebullience, giving Will a huge hug and exclaiming how delighted he was to see Will although his face fell quickly.

“I hate that this is the first thing I’m saying to you but I'm afraid we've got some bad news for you, Will.”

Will's heart stopped. This was it. They were going to tell him that they'd made a mistake, that he wasn't what they were looking for and they'd found another Prince.

“Will?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry. You have some bad news?”

“Yes, I'm afraid that your Swan hasn't arrived. Hannibal has been performing in Lithuania and was supposed to fly in yesterday to start rehearsals. Unfortunately, there was a problem with his visa and he's still stuck there. We're hoping that they can sort it today and that he'll be able to join us tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Will felt a curious mix of relief and deflation. The former because they weren't going to sack him before his first rehearsal, and the latter because he'd psyched himself up for nothing. He was simply going to have to do the same thing tomorrow and hope that the potential mortification of getting an erection dancing with his partner simply didn't happen.

“I know it's not ideal, but we'll make do. The dancer who is understudying the Swan - Matthew Brown - is here and knows the role. What we'll do is start with all of the existing stuff and leave the new choreography for when Hannibal can be here. Now, where's… ah, Matthew! Matthew, this is Will Graham, our Prince. Will, here is your Swan for the day, Matthew.”

Will wasn't sure what it was but, from the instant that he made eye contact with the guy and their hands touched, there was something that he found unsettling about Matthew Brown.

As quickly as he possibly could, he made his way back to the safety of Bev’s side to warm-up. He did his usual stretches as he listened to the conversations around him, conscious that there was one pair of eyes watching him from the other side of the room. Will relaxed automatically as daily class started, Zeller stood at the front calling out the combinations one after another. This was one thing that never changed. It didn’t matter where you were in the world, didn’t matter what company you were dancing with, class was always the same. You could always rely on it; let your body do the movements and your mind just drift. Will didn’t try to push himself to the front – only the worst kind of principals did that – and inside tucked himself in next to Bev, somewhere in the middle. Yet, even so, he couldn’t wholly relax as normal because he was very much aware of the eyes watching him from the other side of the room.

All too soon, class was over, and it was time for the rehearsal itself to start. Class had been interesting; while most people had ballet training, not everyone had focused upon it and it showed. As Jimmy had said, they were starting from the beginning and working on everything that was staying the same, that he wasn’t re-choreographing for this new production.

They started at the beginning and Will relished the differences between this production and those that he had done previously. Even so, it was nerve-wracking. You had fleeting moments

of confidence as an artist, but they never happened in the first few minutes - maybe the first hour - of rehearsals. Not everything was flawless – far from it – but they kept going, just wanting to se what people knew. As they worked, he couldn't help but notice that the guy playing the Private Secretary - was his name Anthony? – bore more than a startling resemblance to Will, just considerably more self-possessed. It was more than a little disconcerting and Will knew that it would take a little getting used to.

At this point in time, there was no Matthew. There was Will, the corps, his creepy double Anthony and the dancer playing his mother, the Queen, a dancer by the name of Bedelia du Maurier. Bedelia was definitely going to take some getting used to; the aloofness of an ice-queen didn't seem to be limited to her stage persona. She barely acknowledged Will, instead choosing to focus completely on her role. Will attempted, out of politeness, but was summarily rebuffed and had to work really hard not to laugh as he caught Bev rolling her eyes in his peripheral vision.

It was fun getting to dance with Bev. She clearly wasn't a professional classical ballerina of Alana's ilk, but she had had a considerable amount of ballet training and was an excellent actress. Indeed, Will found it hard to keep a serious face when they interacted. All too quickly, they had passed the scene in the nightclub and Will had watched Bev, as his girlfriend, betray him.

This was it.

The moment when the swans appeared for the first time. Wreathed in darkness behind Will. This was the moment that Hannibal Lecter should have made his appearance.

Instead, it was Matthew Brown.

It wasn't that Matthew was a bad dancer. Far from it. He was an excellent dancer and he was undoubtedly a handsome man. However, he was no Hannibal Lecter. There wasn't that sensation of other-worldliness with him, this feeling that he *was* the Swan. That he was capable of making Will's Prince fall in love with him. Every single thing that he did, every moment, seemed designed to achieve his goals, not Will's nor Jimmy's as the choreographer. It was, however, awe-inspiring to watch the all-male corps dance together. Will had never seen anything like it.

And then he was there, amidst a multitude of swans.

There was something missing though. Matthew was excellent, doing every single move as he was expected to. Yet, there was something that wasn't quite right. The music was faster than Will was used to, but it was more than that. Matthew seemed to take things almost double speed and, while they were moving together, they weren't gelling perfectly. There was a sense of disconnect between them. It wasn't completely synchronised.

The biggest thing was that Will simply didn't feel comfortable.

There was always something. Matthew made a comment that wasn't quite appropriate. His hands drifted lower than was appropriate. The points in their pas de deux where Will had to wrap himself around Matthew for the lifts brought Will out in a clammy sweat.

This really wasn’t what he had been envisioning.

~*~

As Jimmy called an end to the end of the rehearsals and dismissed all of the dancers for the day, Will wiped the sweat from his face and started his cool-down stretches with no little relief. They had got most of the way through the show and it hadn’t gone badly considering it was the first rehearsal. All around him, dancers were pushing their bodies into various stretches and pulling on their outdoor clothes as they chatted about the day. Across the room, Will could see Matthew trying to make eye contact and studiously looked down, focusing on the strips of colour on his leg warmers and pulling at a few loose threads. He hoped Matthew took the hint because the last thing Will wanted was to spend more time with the guy. And then a balled-up t-shirt hit him in the face at the same time that Bev plopped down cross-legged in front of him.

“First day down and I think that calls for a drink. What do you say, my little pastry?”

Will snorted and tried to demur, but Bev was having none of it and in a split second, Will knew that a lot of time was going to be spent with him saying no to things and then doing them anyway because Bev wanted him to.

“I shouldn't … we're rehearsing early in the morning.”

“And? One drink. You've spent all day being pawed at by Brown, you deserve alcohol. Even better, I'm buying!”

“Fine. One.”

(~*~)

It wasn’t one, of course it wasn’t.

Will had just retaken his seat, setting the second round down on the table, when one of the spare chairs was kicked out and Zeller sat down, plonking down a couple of overflowing pint glasses and spitting out a couple of packets of chips.

“Jimmy’ll be along in a minute.” He side-eyed the full drink in front of Will, “I feel like I should be buying you that. It’s a fucking disaster. Lecter’s still stuck in sodding Lithuania; there was some problem with his visa or something. He definitely won’t be here tomorrow at any rate. He’s heading back to the embassy as soon as they open in the morning and hopefully, he’ll be her by the end of the work. I’m sorry, you’re stuck dancing with Brown in the meantime.”

“Be nice, Zee.” Jimmy’s reproach was soft as he took the remaining seat and drained part of his pint.

“He was being nice,” Bev piped up. “If I’d said it, I’d have called him the octopus. Or something more creative and less pleasant, I just need a bit of time.”

As Bev and Zeller debated names that best described Matthew, Will found Jimmy talking to him. “I’m really sorry about today, Will and this whole situation; I know it’s far from ideal. I’ve spoken to Matthew about his behaviour. Unfortunately, until Hannibal gets here, Matthew's the only one who knows the Swans choreography and the power has gone to his head. But, if it doesn’t get any better then talk to me and we’ll sort it out. I won't have dancers in my company behave like that. Fingers crossed, we get Hannibal’s visa issues sorted and he’ll be with us by the end of the week.”

Will nodded, not saying anything but privately hoping that Hannibal made it before the end of the week. Dancing with his crush was going to be nothing having dealt with Matthew Brown.

Besides, if Brown kept going as he had been, Will wasn’t going to be held responsible for his actions and a bump to his shoulder told him that Bev would be a willing accomplice.

Act Two

Unfortunately for Will – and the rest of the company – Matthew didn't get better and neither did Hannibal arrive. Each day brought a new message to say that the embassy were requiring more information before they were willing to grant his visa. Hannibal couldn't be more apologetic, and it was clear that he was hugely frustrated, that the situation was out of his hands, but that didn't make it any easier to deal with. Not when they had Matthew Brown to contend with.

After Jimmy had spoken with him about his inappropriate behaviour during the first rehearsal, Matthew had taken a subtler approach to making Will feel uncomfortable. His hands didn't wander during rehearsals, yet even the most innocent touch made Will's skin crawl. The worst thing was the way that he constantly seemed to be watching Will, no matter what else was going on; the staring never stopped.

Will took comfort in the fact that he was never left alone with Matthew; his friends made certain of that. Zeller jokingly called them Will's harem; at least, Will thought he was joking. Bev, Margot Verger and Abigail Hobbs. There was a strange sexual tension between Bev and Margot, and Will couldn't figure out if they'd had a thing before or if they were going to end up having one at some point during the production run. Abigail, on the other hand, was barely twenty-one and Swan Lake was her first professional job out of college. Between the three of them, they gave Will a buffer. In class, they sandwiched him in between them at the barre and then hid towards the back for centre work while Matthew positioned himself front and centre, posturing as much as possible and cosying up to the rehearsal pianist, Frederick Chilton.

Still, despite the girl's best efforts, they couldn't keep Matthew away all the time. He and Will still had to dance together. When they did, Matthew made no secret of the fact that he was unhappy with their actions. He was adamant that they spend time together, that if Will would just give him a chance then he would see that Matthew was perfect for this role and a far better choice than Hannibal Lecter. More than that, he was perfect for Will.

And then Matthew had decided to just push things too far.

While Jimmy had said that they would wait on new choreography until Hannibal arrived, with every day that he couldn't get a visa they lost precious time. So, running out of time, Jimmy had decided to try out some ideas that he had had using Matthew and then they would refine them with Hannibal. It was going okay. Will like the ideas that Jimmy had and could see where he wanted to go, but they weren't quite working. Or, rather, Matthew wasn't working. He kept dismissing Jimmy's ideas and trying to put forward his own, but they didn't mesh with the existing choreography. He also couldn't grasp why his ideas were being dismissed – Matthew was so enamoured with the fact that he was the lead, albeit temporarily, that he'd been blinded to everything else.

They'd been working steadily for a couple of hours, tempers fraying by the minute, when the rehearsal was interrupted by Randall, Jimmy's timid assistant, telling them that Jimmy had an

important call that he had to take. The second that they were alone in the studio, Matthew took his chance.

“What do you say you and I go out tonight? Good food, good wine, good company. We can see where the evening takes us.”

From the way that Matthew’s fingers were inching up Will’s leg, he knew exactly where Matthew was suggesting the evening went; his bed.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Will smacked Matthew’s hand away, “I make a habit of not getting involved with my partners.”

“That’s not what I’ve heard. All those rumours about you and Bella Crawford; plenty of people said that you got the principal’s job flat on your back. And then there’s Alana Bloom. An illicit kiss with your partner. You’ll get a reputation.”

Will’s ignored the last jibe. “How did you hear that? About Alana?”

“Freddie has her ways of finding things and out and we’ve known each other for a long time.”

Freddie Lounds.

That red-headed viper.

Of course, it would be her. Once a promising young ballerina, Freddie had got caught up in a rivalry with another dancer that hadn’t ended well. Not only had she been thrown out of ballet school, but when all of the treatments were ended, she had been unable to dance. In need of a new career, she had turned to journalism. By day, she worked for a reasonably well-respected tabloid but, by night, she ran a blog that focused on the more salacious side of the dance world; gossip, injuries, relationships.

Will’s mouth worked furiously, opening and closing although no sound emerged. Before he managed words, the door opened, and Jimmy stuck his head around the frame.

“I’m sorry, guys. I have to deal with this issue, and I don’t know how long it will take; no more rehearsals today. Will, if you wouldn’t mind, the costume department are ready to do some fittings.”

Will nodded jerkily and then exploded the minute Jimmy disappeared.

“How dare you say that I slept my way to the top. While you clearly wouldn’t have any compunctions doing that, I won that job fair and square with talent and hard work. Bella and I never had an affair; she’s like a mother to me. She knits me legwarmers for fuck’s sake. And I don’t know how Freddie found out about Alana and I but it was a kiss. A drunken kiss and nothing more. It was a mistake and one that I won’t be repeating.”

“Are you to be quoted saying that?”

Will stormed over to his bag. “Look, you may have set your sights on me, but I’m not interested in you in the slightest. Not now. Not ever just stay away from me.”

Will was still seething by the time that he found the costume department, but his mood brightened when he found Abigail there being fitted for her Moth Maiden costume as well as the one she would wear as the princess of Monaco. He liked Abigail – Abby as he, Bev and Margot were allowed to call her – a lot and he had a lot of time for her. He also knew exactly how she felt; he had also joined a large production straight out of school, all wide-eyed and innocent. For that reason alone, Will wanted to protect her.

Quiet where Bev was outgoing, Abby could be vivacious when you got to know her, and she was a beautifully lyrical dancer. Given that she was ballet trained, Will was even considering trying to get her a corps audition with Jack’s company if she wanted. What he did like was that Abby had grown up an outdoors girl and was very happy to sit and listen to Will wax lyrical about his dogs. That made him like a person.

An hour later, after rhapsodising about Winston and relaying Buster’s latest antics to a giggling Abby, Will was in a much better mood despite being poked and prodded what seemed like a hundred times. Indeed, he was in such a good mood that, when Bev and Margot kidnapped he and Abby for dinner, he didn’t protest. At least not too much. The production had only been up for a week and already he’d been more sociable than he had been in three months at Jack’s ; as well as drinks and dinner most nights, he’d found that Bev had added him to two group chats which was made all the more impressive by the fact that he didn’t remember giving her his number in the first place.

He wouldn’t be able to sustain this pace for the whole run. No way. Will was, by habit, an anti-social creature. He genuinely enjoyed spending time by himself and actually craved it in order to keep himself as some semblance of a semi-functioning human being. Even when he did get it, he wasn’t sure that he succeeded.

Then again, he wouldn’t be able to do it once the actual performances started. Things had come a long way since the days when dancers survived on cigarettes, carrot sticks and not a lot else. Now, there was sports science and nutritionists; dancers had to eat well and plenty of it in order for their bodies to be able to cope with the huge amounts of physical pressure that they were placed under. Even so, Will’s habits would change the closer that they got towards a run of shows. He’d stop drinking alcohol, start taking some supplements that would help his joints and focus on bulking out his diet with foods that would boost his energy. So, he might as well enjoy life while he could.

(~*~)

Dinner had been pleasant. Margot knew a hole in the wall place that served great burgers and beer, had a reasonable selection of whiskey and didn’t care to check Abby’s ID. They had all eaten far too much – and drank too much considering they had a 10am call for class. Unsurprisingly, Bev had wanted to talk about Matthew and Will wasn’t interested, shutting the conversation down as quickly as he could. Instead, he had chatted quietly to Abby, listening to her talk about different companies that she was considering auditioning for and offering his own advice and opinions, while Margot and Bev flirted on the other side of the table. They were just finishing off their beers when Will felt that prickle down his spine that

said he was being watched. It was a sensation that he had sadly grown used to over the last week.

Casting a glance over his shoulder, he tried to see who it was watching him, but it was hard to see anything distinctly in the smoky darkness. Besides, it was a bar and, while he might next to no social skills, he still got hit on a fair amount by both men and women. Even so, Will felt uncomfortable while they paid their bill and gathered their things, irrespective of the fact that he couldn't determine who was watching him. As they left, Will standing to the side to let the others go ahead of him, a hand latched onto his arm and pulled him into an alley by the entrance to the bar. Will glanced at the face of the person had accosted him; of course, he should have guessed.

"Matthew, what the fuck?"

Will could see that the girls had realised that Will was no longer with them and had turned around to see where he was. He also saw the moment that they realised why – or who – was the reason that he was behind. Margot frowned, Abby looked unhappy and, quite frankly, Bev looked murderous. In fact, Margot had grabbed her arm, preventing her from coming back over. He shook his head, as she mouthed asking if he wanted her to phone the police.

"How sweet. Your pets are worried," there was an unmistakeable sneer in Matthew's voice. One that was matched visually, twisting his face.

"Don't call them that. And can you blame them for being worried? You followed me. Hell, you're stalking me."

"I had to make you understand. I *have* to make you understand. Why can you not see it?" Matthew's grip tightened on Will's wrist until it was painful.

"What can't I see?"

"That we belong together." The sneer was gone, replaced by an insistent tone, one that was almost desperate. "We're hawks, you and I. We're the same. Solitary creatures that can be scared away by smaller birds. But if we work together, we can remain dominant."

"Remain dominant? Matthew, what are you talking about? We're dancers, nothing more than that."

"But we could be more than that. The two of us together, we could be world famous."

Will shook his head. "I don't want to be world famous, Matthew. Especially not with you."

"Ah, yes. Of course. If it were someone else having this conversation with you, then you might not be quite so reticent."

Will glanced over Matthew's shoulder, seeing where Bev, Margot and Abby still waited for him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course, you don't. However, if Hannibal Lecter had said the same thing to you, then you would have jumped at the opportunity."

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Whatever you say. Just you wait though. We’ll see if Lecter makes it in time for opening night. Or, if he does, whether you survive this without making a fool of yourself.”

Will’s anger seethed. He wrenched his arm from Matthew’s grasp and shoved past him, turning to look back over his shoulder. “Fuck you, Matthew. Hannibal will make it and you’ll end up watching from the back row of the corps on opening night. I don’t want to see you outside the studio; if I do then I’m reporting you to Jimmy and then the cops for harassment.”

Will caught up to the waiting women, giving Bev a reassuring knock to the shoulder. “Let’s go.”

“You alright?” There was no denying the concern in her voice, or the way that Abby and Margot moved in closer.

“Absolutely fine. He won’t be a problem again.”

“Here’s fucking hoping.”

~*~

His run-in with Matthew the previous evening – as well as in rehearsal - had cast a downer on Will’s evening, frustrating considering how pleasant it had been. He’d ended up sleeping badly and waking with a headache. Of course, that meant that he hadn’t wanted to get out of bed which inevitably led to him grabbing a breakfast burrito on his way alongside a vat of coffee with a chaser of painkillers, and him arriving thirty minutes later to the studio than he was planning on arriving.

He was still early for class. He’d deliberately planned it that way, especially as he hadn’t decided whether or not to tell Jimmy about the incident with Matthew the previous evening. What he’d been hoping for was an empty studio so that he could warm up in private while he turned things over in his head; dancing helped him process things, helped him see them more clearly.

What he hadn’t expected was for the studio to already be occupied.

Jimmy and Zeller – the latter looking half-asleep and grouchy as hell - were already there, along with a guy in jeans and a hoodie, doing pirouettes in socked feet. Will stared, completely dumbfounded as the man finished in an arabesque, laughing as he complained that it was supposed to be a triple, not the double that he’d just done. That was Hannibal Lecter.

Hannibal fucking Lecter was in the studio, doing double pirouettes in jeans and a hoodie.

The kit bag slung over Will’s shoulder slid off and landed on the floor with a thump. Seriously, how was this Will’s life? Every morning for the last week, he had psyched himself up, just in case it was the day that Hannibal materialised in the rehearsal studio and nothing.

The morning that Will doesn't bother, that he had a headache and was in a foul mood, the man appears. The irony was immense.

The sound alerted Jimmy to Will's presence and he spun around, his face wreathed in smiles. "Will, fantastic! I was hoping you'd be here early. As you can see, great news; Hannibal's visa issues all got sorted and he's here. Hannibal, meet Will Graham, your prince."

Hannibal moved forward to shake Will's hand and Will went to meet him halfway, only to remember too late that his kit bag was on the floor in front of him. His foot got caught and then he was falling, flailing his arms for good measure and looking like a total idiot. A hand appeared in his vision, hauling him to his feet.

"The pleasure is all mine. I have to say though, while I realise you've been stuck dancing with Matthew, my partners are not normally so eager to see me that they fall at my feet."

Utterly mortified, Will fell back on his default setting; being an asshole.

"An accident, I assure you. I don't find you that interesting."

Lecter, to give him his due, didn't seem at all fazed by Will's behaviour.

"You will." Lecter gave a crooked smile, one that flashed his little fangs, and Will was gone; his bloody traitorous cock working overtime.

Oh shit. Could this get any worse? Will had run countless scenarios as to how their first meeting might go. None of them had even come close to this disaster. Not only had he embarrassed himself and been an asshole to his partner, but he'd got a hardon to compound his humiliation. Grabbing his bag and hoisting it onto his shoulder, pulling it around in front of him so that it covered his crotch, Will muttered something about getting changed and fled for the changing rooms.

He deliberately went for the smallest one, the one that most people avoided and locked the door behind him. He could just ignore his erection and sit here until it subsided, replaying his first mortifying interaction with Hannibal over and over again. Or, he could take care of things in the shower and maybe get it out of his system. It was probably wishful thinking but … hope springs eternal and all that rot.

Of course, Will ended up in the shower. It was one thing to have watched near enough every single video of Hannibal that the internet could throw up, but it was another thing entirely to be faced with the man in the flesh. Seriously, it should be illegal for a man to be that attractive. From the tanned flesh to the crooked grin that flashed those fangs and the way that his eyes had crinkled when he smiled. His form as he turned. Will closed his eyes and pictured it all as he braced himself against the wall of the shower, pulling at his cock. The sound of running water mostly masked the sound of flesh slapping against flesh, but Will bit into the meat of his shoulder to muffle his cries and whimpers. He came minutes later with a loud cry, one that couldn't be completely silenced, and he waited, holding his breath for a sign that someone had heard him, as the running water carried away his semen.

Not exactly how he'd planned to start his morning.

(~*~)

His little ‘problem’ taken care of, Will got changed and made his way through to the rehearsal studio. In the time that he had been in the shower, the space had started filling up with the rest of the dancers and a motley crew were assembled by the barres in a variety of stretches. As Will made his way over to his usual spot at the bar, in between an annoyingly bright-eyed Abby and a reassuringly bleary-eyed Bev, he looked around for Hannibal. This would be where they saw whether or not Hannibal passed Will’s ‘is he a dick’ test. Matthew was already at his spot on the first barre, next to Chilton and Will was reminded that he didn’t decide what to do about the previous evening; Hannibal’s arrival had put it clear out of his mind.

Speaking of the devil, Hannibal had arrived in the studio and a sudden hush fell over the room. This would be an interesting class. After a week, the company had started to gel, but Hannibal was an unknown quantity, just as Will had been on the first day. He was an international name and they were all curious as to how he would behave. Will tried to focus on his stretches, but he was kidding himself. Every single atom of him was focused on Hannibal.

He’d clearly used one of the other changing rooms, changing out of his jeans and hoodie. Yet, he didn’t wear traditional practise clothes. Instead, he wore a mismatched combination of tracksuit and t-shirt from a variety of sporting brands, while his hair was pushed back from his face with a band. Admittedly, given that they were now all professionals and not students in dance school, they didn’t have a uniform per se but still, most of them wore some semblance of expected ballet wear. Hannibal also didn’t wear ballet shoes, but socks. As Will watched, Hannibal bestowed a hug upon the newly arrived – and also annoyingly fresh-faced – Margot, before he made his way to one of the central barres and bent to kiss Bedelia on both cheeks. Satisfied with her position, he made a space for himself and started to stretch as he spoke to her in – was that Italian? – seemingly uncaring of the scrutiny that he was being subjected to.

Will’s scrutiny, however, was spared for Margot as she slipped in next to him at the barre.

“Were you ever going to mention that you knew Hannibal?”

“It never really came up,” Margot was clearly unrepentant. “Besides, I don’t know him that well. I know his sister, Mischa, much better. The two of us were at ballet school together. She dances in Paris now; we’re still in touch though.”

There was no further opportunity for gossip as Zeller started their class, not giving Hannibal any extra attention, the same as he had behaved with Will. The guy could be an asshole, but Will respected his lack of bias. Everybody, subtle or not, was watching Hannibal. He was either oblivious or he didn’t give a shit about the glances shot his way. In the most part, they were admiring – speculative even - but, from one part of the barre, they could only be described as murderous.

Matthew Brown was clearly unhappy that Hannibal had finally made an appearance. This meant that he was, once more, relegated to the corps and his chance of glory was gone.

Unless he did something stupid.

Will might not like the guy, but he really hoped that Matthew didn't do something stupid.

~*~

Despite the fact that they had lost a week of rehearsals without Hannibal, once they had finished class, Jimmy opted to start from the beginning of the show and do a run straight through. Act one was pretty slick now and they had started to refine things. Will still wasn't used to dancing with Bedelia and Anthony was as creepy as ever. However, dancing with Bev was a blast. Today, it was even more amusing because Bev was clearly suffering from the previous evening. Their time together was all too brief and then it was time for act two.

The act in the city park. The famous swan act.

The act that featured Hannibal's first appearance as the Swan.

This was what Will had been waiting for for the last week and he found himself holding his breath in anticipation.

The corps seemed revitalised with Hannibal at their head instead of Matthew. Will couldn't see them, although he knew that they were dancing behind him, but the energy felt different somehow. Casting a sneak peek at Bev confirmed his thoughts. The swans behind him exited the 'stage' and Will was left alone as the Prince wrote his suicide note. And then it was time for Hannibal to enter the stage.

Were this a traditional production of Swan Lake, the ballerina playing Odette would be aiming to create an illusion of being an ethereal creature. This being formed by magic, from another world. That wasn't feasible for Hannibal. His presence was simply too powerful. Yet, even in Adidas tracksuit pants and a threadbare t-shirt that strained at his shoulders and clung to his stomach, he had this otherworldly presence that Will had imagined.

From his very first step, Hannibal *was* the Swan.

He made his entrance, leaping over Will's head and a shiver went down Will's spine. In the exact same moment, Hannibal's grand jéte caused his t-shirt to ride up and reveal just a sliver of belly which, in turn, was like a lightning bolt to Will's cock. But then he was mesmerised by Hannibal's dancing.

Every single movement, every ripple of his back, every flick of his head was perfectly in character. As the Prince, Will was supposed to be entranced by the Swan and, well, he wasn't having to act. He couldn't help but follow Hannibal around the stage, watching wide-eyed. And then they were off-stage and it was the turn of the corps. Will couldn't believe the difference in them. It wasn't as though they had been dancing badly this week, but it had been a little lacklustre. Now, there was a drive, a focus to their dancing. As though a fire had been lit underneath them, from the shy Peter to the somewhat apathetic Nick.

By the time that they got to the first pas de deux that Will and Hannibal shared, Will could feel his chest was tight and the blood was thrumming in his veins in anticipation. The

rejuvenated corps was giving them all life.

That didn’t change once they started dancing. From the very beginning of their pas de deux, from when Hannibal used Will as his support to promenade in attitude to the moment that Hannibal held his attitude, leg wrapped back around Will’s hip with Will’s hips at Hannibal’s thigh and waist, Will knew that this was something special. He knew and that this partnership was going to be something to be seen, something to rival what he had shared with Bella. Just, more somehow. There was none of the disconnect that he had felt with Matthew. He and Hannibal were perfectly in synch with each other and, except for maybe Bella and Alana, Will had never felt more comfortable with a partner. They had never danced together, but it felt as though they had been doing so for the whole of their professional careers.

Every single movement was anticipated perfectly and the connection was palpable. They could barely tear their eyes away from each other, and that was a big deal for Will who had never been that fond of it.

As act two came to a close, a hush fell across the studio before the entire company burst into rapturous applause while Will and Hannibal grinned at each other, both of them feeling almost giddy. If there had been any concerns about the success of this, they had just been vanquished.

~*~

Things didn't change as rehearsals continued over the next few days. Jimmy was in raptures and even Zeller had been seen cracking a smile. Everyone was rejuvenated and working harder than before. It was one of those times when everyone knew that what they were working on was something really special, one of those dream projects that doesn't come around too often.

Hannibal had slotted into the company perfectly and liked by everyone. He was supportive to the rest of the swans, didn't have airs and graces and mucked in with the rest of them. He smoked like a chimney on breaks and rarely said no to a beer after a long day of rehearsals. What Will really liked, was the way that he helped the younger dancers in the corps; Marissa Schurr and Cassie Boyle, who were playing two of the princesses and Nick Boyle, one of the youngest swans, but especially Abby. Will had grown truly fond of Abby, seeing her as a little sister, and he knew that she had a genuine talent that needed to be nurtured and cultivated. He'd spent plenty of time after hours with her in the studio, not only running her Moth Maiden solo but possible audition repertoire as well, and it pleased him to see that Hannibal was doing the same, offering his opinions.

"He used to do the same with Mischa, when we were students. Still does, I believe."

"They're close?"

"Yeah. They're orphans; parents were killed when they were young and they were on their own for a while before an aunt and uncle were found. Both Hannibal and Mischa trained at the Paris Opera."

Will raised an eyebrow, well that explained a lot. "She sounds interesting."

"You'd like her a lot. Maybe she'll come to see the show and you can meet her."

Will gave a noncommittal hum and focused on what he could see in the studio; Abby had a tendency to over-rotate on her left side and it seemed like Hannibal had noticed that as well, something that pleased Will for some inexplicable reason.

"Just make sure you stop drooling before your rehearsal; you wouldn't want to slip and fall flat on your arse in front of Hannibal."

"What?" Will scrubbed at his chin, as a laughing Margot flounced off down the corridor making kissing noises. "I hate my life."

~*~

The private rehearsals - where it was just Will, Hannibal and Jimmy - were going just as well as the full cast ones. There had been a little part of Will that had been concerned that the success with Hannibal had simply been sheer relief that he was no longer dancing with Matthew. That definitely wasn't the case.

The chemistry between them was just as electric and had Will feeling more than a little hot under the collar. Even if he weren't dancing with a man, this was completely different to dancing with Alana. He enjoyed dancing with Alana, but with Hannibal, he ran a whole gamut of emotions while he danced.

The choreographic process was a lot smoother with Hannibal there. He didn't fight against Jimmy's ideas, he embraced them. Like Will, he could see what Jimmy was trying to achieve. With them both on the same wavelength, they found themselves improvising; taking Jimmy's choreography and running with it, seeing where the emotions and movement took them. It was a far more collaborative process than any new work Will had worked on but he relished the creative process. It helped that Jimmy was willing to loosen the reins and let them experiment. He changed a few things here and there, but was more than happy to include their ideas.

By the time that Hannibal had been in situ for five days, they were at a point where they were able to run all of their pas de deux's including all of the new material. As a result of seeing them dance together, Jimmy had even decided to include a new pas de deux, utilising some music that had been left out in his previous incarnations. They were due to run the whole ballet the following day - a Saturday - before having the Sunday off and resuming on Monday. As a result, Jimmy had requested that they dance the new pas de deux one final time flat out before they departed for the evening.

This was the part that Will and Hannibal had contributed to the most and it was easily the most erotic piece of choreography that Will had ever danced. Every single movement, every step was sexually charged, designed to seduce. Their bodies slid together as though this dance were a precursor to sex. It called for extensive eye- contact and hands caressing faces, tangling in hair. By the time they found their final pose - Will's thigh wrapped around Hannibal's hip, hand on his cheek while Hannibal had one hand low on Will's back and the other on the back of his neck, their foreheads resting against each other - their chests were heaving and the sweat was dripping from them. Will was painfully hard in his dance belt and

he was pretty sure that Hannibal was as well. There was a bead of sweat just above Hannibal's lip and, if Jimmy hadn't burst into rapturous applause, Will was pretty certain that he would have given in to temptation.

"Well, if you dance like that, I think you're going to have audience members sliding off their seats. The chemistry between you is off the charts. Great job, guys. I just knew that I made the right choice casting you two. Go and enjoy your Friday night."

Will didn't waste any time; he muttered a hasty goodbye and made a swift exit for the sanctuary of the showers.

(~*~)

"So, you and the delectable Lecter … what's the story?"

Bev, Margot and Abigail had invited themselves over for dinner when Will had refused to go out, citing his need to spend some time with the dogs. He obviously hadn't mentioned the fact that the quick wank he'd had at the studio hadn't been enough after his rehearsal with Hannibal and he'd had to resort to using his favourite toy when he got home. Buster was cradled in Abby's lap like a baby looking extremely pleased with himself while Bev and Margot were buried under a pile of dogs. Only Winston had refused to turn traitor and stayed at Will's side.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh please. Your flirting is so far off the charts that a blind person could spot it a mile off. What I want to know is what it's like when you're in the studio by yourselves; is it better or worse? Because the public eye-fucking is pretty intense already. Zee said you're worse but I can't work out if he's shitting me or not."

Will choked on his drink, "Bev!"

"What? Zee likes nothing more than being a shit and I need accurate information so I can decide whether or not I should set up a pool on when you and Lecter are going to bang."

"Set up the pool. They're worse."

Now Will did choke. "ABBY!"

"What? It's the truth. I watched your rehearsal this morning. Hannibal looked as though he wanted to rip your clothes off and have you on the studio floor. I could have bought pointe shoes for a year if I'd sold tickets to that show."

Margot and Bev high-fived Abby as Will gaped like a fish.

"That's it. You're cut off; you're not allowed to spend time with these miscreants anymore. They're corrupting you."

"Whatever, *dad."* Abby looked pleased as Bev and Margot cheered and nudged her. "They're expensive and if I'm auditioning for companies like you and Hannibal suggest, I'll be getting

through them even quicker."

"So, you both clearly want to jump each other's bones. When are you going to do something about it?"

Will petted Winston, ruffling his ears as he killed time before answering. "I'm not going to. Look, even if Hannibal is flirting and interested, that doesn't mean it's a good idea. I kissed Alana once and it was a huge mistake; things were awkward as hell for the rest of the run and they're still not back to normal. What if the same thing happens with Hannibal? I can't risk it. Maybe at the end of the run."

Will buried his face in Winston's face as soon as he finished speaking. Maybe if he couldn't see the faces that they were pulling, it meant that it wasn't happening.

~*~

Of course, the good luck had to end.

On Saturday morning, Marissa was missing from class. She wasn't answering her phone and nobody had seen her since the corps were released the following day. She finally made a somewhat sheepish entrance as class was ending, on crutches and with her left ankle in plaster up to her knee. When questioned, she couldn't remember exactly what had happened but was fairly certain that she had got drunk and then decided to show off her ability to do fouettes. In stilettos.

Zeller exploded. He railed at her for her selfishness, for her lack of common sense and her lack of respect for her fellow dancers. Jimmy just kept shaking his head and looking as though he wanted to cry. As a crying Marissa left, head hanging low, Jimmy summoned Randall and told him to start phoning the dancers that they hadn't cast to see if any of them were still available. Before Randall could get started, Hannibal stepped forward.

"Forgive me if I am being too forward, but I may have a solution. My sister…"

"Would she be willing to dance?"

"The season has ended in Paris. I see no harm in a phone call. If she says no, then nothing has been lost."

"Yes, please."

Hannibal did as asked and, after retrieving his phone, conducted a brief conversation in what Will assumed was Lithuanian. It couldn't have been more than a couple of minutes before Hannibal hung up and gave a reassuring smile.

"Mischa would be delighted to be of assistance. She will get a flight tomorrow and join us at some point on Monday."

An ecstatic Jimmy planted a smacking kiss to Hannibal's cheek before kissing Zeller in triumph. "Now this calls for a celebration. First round in Kade's is on me tonight."

"Now get back to work, you lazy bastards!

Despite Marissa's missing princess, the full rehearsal went well. Amazingly well. Hannibal and Will even received a standing ovation from the company at the end of their act 3 pas de deux. As a result, almost the whole cast went to Kade's - the bar just down the block from the studio - to take Jimmy up on his offer. Unsurprisingly, both Hannibal and Will were popular with everyone. Everyone wanted to congratulate them, to discuss something with them.

When they were released, Will was more than a little surprised that Hannibal stayed by his side. As Margot and Bev flirted - again - and a clumsy Nick Boyle complimented Abby on her dancing, Hannibal listened to Will ramble on about his dogs. To Will's amazement, Hannibal didn't just listen, he asked questions as though he were genuinely interested. Not only that, but he asked for Will's phone number. Okay, so it was phrased in case they needed to discuss anything or schedule extra rehearsals but that wasn't the point. The point was that Hannibal had asked.

It was as he was giving Hannibal the last few digits of his cell number, that Will felt that familiar sensation that he was being watched. Sure enough, when he scanned the room, Matthew was watching him, glaring daggers at Hannibal.

Will really hoped he hadn't majorly fucked up by giving Hannibal his number.

~*~

On the Monday, despite Will's worries, Matthew seemed quiet during class. He still stood in his usual spot at the front near Chilton, but he wasn't posturing as much. Of course, that didn't go unnoticed. Abby, naive and wanting to believe the best in everyone, suggested that he might have changed but Margot and Bev had rolled their eyes and said that he was up to something. Will, despite a very pleasant Sunday texting Hannibal, couldn't help but agree with them and found himself struggling to concentrate during the first exercises at the barre.

Things went without a hitch until they finished at the barre and started to move the barres away, ready to start centre work. Some of the ladies changed into pointe shoes and this was the time when Hannibal usually changed from socks to ballet shoes. He went about his usual routine, only to stop when he started to roll onto the ball of his right foot. Standing on one leg, he removed the shoe and upended it, a stream of broken glass falling from it. The same happened with the left shoe.

The whole room fell silent. Completely and utterly shell shocked.

And then Matthew started shouting. How he should have been the Swan, how Will belonged to him and on and on. How Hannibal had ruined everything. While most people were frozen in shock, Will saw Randall make a phone call out of the corner of his eye. Ten minutes later, and the studio was crawling with police.

"Hannibal, I cannot apologise enough. This should never have happened. We've had issues with him, but I never thought he would stoop to this level."

“It could be worse. A bit of glass is nothing. We could be in Russia and it could have been acid in my face."

Will had to hand it to Hannibal; he was taking this with great magnanimity. If it had been Will who had found glass in his ballet shoes - put there by a fellow member of the company - he would not have been this calm. He was certainly a lot calmer than Matthew, who was all but howling as he was cuffed and led away by the police. Hannibal followed Will's gaze, his face and tone remaining placid.

"He is no great loss to the company, we will be fine without him. I have another pair of shoes so we can continue with the class."

Indeed, it appeared as though class would continue as normal with Matthew barely missed by anyone. If anything, the whole incident raised people's opinions of Hannibal given his calm reaction to the whole thing. They were now less than four weeks away from opening night and they all hoped that they made it there without further incident. Zeller had just started to demonstrate the adage when he was interrupted again, this time by a statuesque blonde who looked somewhat familiar.

"Well that was all terribly dramatic. I hope it wasn't done for my benefit."

Hannibal darted away from his spot at the bar - now next to Will, much to the amusement of certain ladies - swinging her around with a goofy grin.

"Mischa!"

Mischa Lecter had arrived.

Intermission

Mischa definitely made things more interesting in more ways than one.

On the dance front, she couldn't have been more perfect. It was a huge coup for Jimmy and the company to have a soloist from the Paris Opera Ballet in the production as well as Will and Hannibal. It was certainly better than Marissa, who had only done ballet because it was a requirement of her course. Everybody was inordinately grateful to her for stepping in in their hour of need but Mischa was humble and brushed off their gratitude, saying that it was a great opportunity for her to actually dance in the same production as her brother. She also passed Will's test, pausing to give Bedelia a kiss to each cheek before continuing to give Margot as an exuberant greeting as the one she had bestowed upon her brother. Zeller called the company back to order, starting to call out what he wanted for the adage. Will listened with half an ear, most of his attention focused on Mischa.

She had stepped out of her street clothes to reveal practise clothes beneath and was somehow managing to split her attention between warming up, listening to Zeller and having a conversation with Hannibal in what Will was pretty certain was Lithuanian. It was all very impressive. And then she started dancing and Will was impressed all over again. She was amazing. Her training at Paris Opera was apparent, as was the fact that she was a world-class dancer, just as her brother. Will could even see similarities between her dancing and Hannibal's. What he couldn't understand was why she wasn't an international name already. He glanced to his right at Abby and he could practically see the hearts in her eyes; she was clearly going to idolise Mischa. Just beyond Abby, at the other side of the studio, he could see Bev watching Mischa with a very different – but no less intense – look in her eye and he hoped that this wasn't going to cause issues with Margot. He was fond of both of them and he didn't want to have to pick sides.

The rest of class went smoothly and, as it drew to an end, the company split up for rehearsals. The swans were to be drilled by Zeller while Jimmy worked with Hannibal and Will. The princesses would be working with the other ballet mistress – Molly – to get Mischa up to speed on the new choreography, which was different to that which she was used to. Somehow, Will didn't think that she would have any problems. After all, she had danced the dual role of Odette/Odile and, if she could remember all of that choreography, then the role of Hungarian princess wouldn't cause her any problems. Not that it was Will's place to worry about it. No, he had his own problems to worry about.

Mainly revolving around Hannibal.

Dancing with Hannibal was amazing, there was no doubt about that. It was everything that Will had hoped for and more. The problem was that, dancing with Hannibal was an exquisite torture. Will had known that before he went into this thing but there had been one thing that he had never considered the possibility of. Hadn't dared to. And that was the possibility that Hannibal was as interested in Will as Will was in him.

He had known that this partnership with Hannibal was something special. Something that would exceed what he had with Alana, would rival what he had had with Bella. Yet, it wasn't just the dancing that was special. It was more than that. There was a connection there, one that Will didn't think he had ever had with anybody before. Hannibal had said that Will would find him interesting and he had been right. But what was more mind-boggling was that Hannibal seemed to find Will just as interesting. And then there was that frisson of sexual tension that was constantly there, and which felt like it was threatening to boil over every time they made eye contact; which was frequently. Will had wondered if he was imagining it, if it was just wishful thinking, until Bev had brought it up and Margot and Abby had confirmed her proclamation. Now, Will couldn't stop thinking about it.

What if they were right? What if Hannibal was actually interested in Will? Will hadn't been lying to Bev and the others that he was worried about possible repercussions if he tried something with Hannibal and it failed. Things with Alana had left him badly burned and, given how much he was enjoying himself, he didn't want to destroy everything. The way that Hannibal behaved didn't help Will's resolve though.

He was never unprofessional or creepy like Matthew had been. He was just … intense was probably the right word. Hannibal was always close to Will, not just when they were dancing, but when they were discussing things either between themselves or with Jimmy. Will never felt like he was looming though, or trying to appear imposing. Instead, he found it strangely reassuring. And then there was the eye contact. Will had never had this much eye contact with a partner and it felt right. There was just something about Hannibal that felt right.

Of course, that had Will's crush working in overdrive. He could control himself in rehearsals but, whenever he got home, he found himself wanking furiously. He hadn't masturbated this much since he was a teenager; it was amazing that his cock wasn't red raw. It definitely made his resolution to not initiate anything with Hannibal until the end of the run harder to stick to.

~*~

The day after Mischa's arrival, she and Hannibal arrived at rehearsal together and immediately headed over to where Will was warming up at the barre whilst simultaneously inhaling his third coffee of the day.

"Will, I would like you to meet my sister, Mischa. Mischa, this is Will Graham."

Given how cheerful she looked, Will was a little concerned that Mischa might be a hugger and so he was very relieved when she held out a hand instead. "It's so nice to meet you. Hanni has spoken about you so much, I feel like I know you already."

Will felt his eyebrows rise as he turned to look at Hannibal. "Hanni?"

"Childhood nickname that I have never quite managed to persuade her to abandon."

Will turned back to Mischa, and shook the outstretched hand. "It's nice to meet you too. I'm afraid I can't say the same about you; Hannibal hasn't really mentioned you." And then Will processed what else Mischa had said. "Wait, how much has Hannibal talked about me? It can't be that much; he's only been here a week."

"Perhaps, but the internet is a wonderful thing. Sometimes. Hanni was talking about you for a while before he got here. He's seen all of your videos on YouTube."

Was that a blush dusting Hannibal's ridiculous cheekbones? Will couldn't help but be amused as Hannibal wrapped an arm around Mischa and tried to direct her away towards Bedelia.

"I think perhaps it is time for us to find a spot at the barre, Mischa?"

"What's wrong with here? Isn't this where you usually stand with your friends? I like it here."

Mischa was an immovable force and would not be moved, forcing Hannibal to give up and resign himself to being embarrassed by his sister. He looked positively relieved as Zeller chose that moment to knock back his espresso and clap his hands, calling the room to order and class to start.

As the day progressed, through class and then a full run-through, Will couldn't help but be aware that he was being scrutinised by Mischa. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about it. At least not until he and Hannibal had finished one of their pas de deux and he saw the smile that curved her lips and the pleased look in her eyes. She then proceeded to bombard Hannibal with a flurry of Lithuanian, not giving him the opportunity to respond before she whirled on Will.

"I'm sorry I couldn't meet you all properly last night; jet lag. Margot told me about a pub down the road and we were going to go. It would be lovely if you would join us. It would be nice to get to know the person that has Hanni so intrigued."

Despite his resolutions, and the fact that the dogs would be getting their dinner late - again - he found himself agreeing.

The instant that they sat down in Kade's, Will found that Mischa had arranged the seating beforehand so he was besieged by Mischa on one side, Bev on the other and Hannibal at the other end of the table. Mischa didn't waste her time. Will had barely taken a sip of his drink before she was firing questions at him.

"So, how you're with Jack Crawford's company? You've been a principal since you were 19? Where are you from? Are you single? Who do you normally partner? Tell me everything."

Will, like a deer in the headlights, was apparently a sucker for anyone with the Lecter name, did exactly that.

~*~

It didn't take long for Will to regret Mischa's arrival. Well, maybe that was a rather strong statement.

Oh, she was a wonderful dancer, a lovely human being and Hannibal clearly adored her, but her choice in friends sucked. And yes, Will was perfectly aware that said friends were also his friends. She had teamed up with Bev and Margot, turning the duo - who were bad enough on their own - into an unholy trinity set on making Will’s life far more complicated than it

needed to be. Worse, they were set on corrupting Abby and dragging her along for the ride. It galled Will that she hadn't needed all that much persuasion.

The alliance seemed to have started the evening that Mischa had cornered him in Kade's and questioned him about everything. To be honest, he was amazed that she hadn't asked for his social security number, blood type and baby photos. Since then, they all seemed hell-bent on forcing Will to do sociable things with, but not being happy with the way that he did them? It was Jack Crawford and the supposedly obligatory gala dinners with patrons and donors all over again.

There had been tickets to a concert that Will had had to leave halfway through when the vet phoned about one of his dogs, an exhibition about dance that they had run into Bella at and Will had invited her to join them at, a lunch where Margot, Bev and Mischa had all strangely cancelled and even Abby had tried to leave them alone.

Will didn't know if it was as a direct result of these events but, now, there was a lot of furtive glances, whispered conversations or conversations that stopped completely when he got close and some rather scary cackling. Even more disturbing had been the couple of times that Jimmy had joined them with a look of glee as he participated.

None of it was good for Will. It was making him paranoid, jumpy and grumpy as hell. Essentially, the complete opposite of Hannibal who was still perfectly calm and collected. What the hell was Will supposed to assume from that? Was all of this just for Will's benefit? Or was he just not seeing them do the same to Hannibal? Even worse, was it directed at Hannibal as well and he wasn't reacting because he wasn't interested in Will? All of these things that Will thought he was seeing were just in his head.

Although, the more that he thought about it, all of those sociable events had been with Hannibal. Add in their behaviour and, well, Will was often oblivious but he wasn't totally stupid. Were they matchmaking?

He distinctly remembered having a conversation with Margot and Bev where he had quite clearly said that he didn't want to do anything about his crush on Hannibal until after the show had ended. Yet, not only had they decided to ignore him, they'd pulled Hannibal's sister into their scheming. Well, there was only one thing for it; Will was just going to have to ignore them and hope that they gave up.

Somehow, he didn't think it would work.

~*~

"So, Will, has Hanni cooked for you yet?"

Mischa asked her question as they were all sat in Kade's one evening after rehearsals, about ten days after Mischa had arrived. Rehearsals were progressing apace and, at the start of the next week, they would be moving into the venue to start getting used to the space.

"Umm, no?" Will was a little confused by the question. "Why would he have done?"

"Because he's an amazing cook and he likes cooking for people. The most ridiculous recipes. It's like a whole show. He juggles the food and everything. You should come for dinner one night and he can cook."

"Oh no, I couldn't…"

"Mažoji sesuo, perhaps Will…"

Both Will and Hannibal spoke at the same time, only to stop and laugh awkwardly, both gesturing for the other to go first before Will spoke.

"Don't feel that you have to. I wouldn't want to impose if you felt like you'd been forced to invite me."

"Not at all. Mischa is right, I do enjoy cooking for people very much and friends even more so. The only reason that I haven't asked before was because I was not sure if you were … how do you say it? Sick of the sight of me? We already spend all day together…"

"No, no." Will cleared his throat and flushed at how eagerly he had responded. "I, umm, I'm not sick of you. Not at all." He deliberately ignored the way that Bev and Margot's shoulders were shaking in silent laughter.

Ugh. Evil wenches. He hated them. "Dinner would be great. As long as you're sure I'm not imposing. Don't feel you have to."

"Not at all. It would be my genuine pleasure. Would Saturday be convenient? If you don't already have plans that is…"

That was the comment that broke Bev and she snorted. Loudly. Which earned her a glare from Abby and an amused look from Mischa. Margot had opted for signalling for more booze. Will just wanted the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

"No, I don't have plans" *other than walking my pack.* "Do you want me…"

"You don't need to bring anything except yourself, my dear Will."

Thank god for the low lighting in Kade's, otherwise everybody would be able to see Will was blushing so much he resembled a tomato. Yeah, there was no chance Will was going to survive this.

~*~

By the time that Saturday came around, Will was starting to regret his acceptance of dinner with Hannibal. Why had he agreed to this? Abby had offered to look after the dogs for the evening, but Will had assured her that it was unnecessary. Mostly, Will hadn’t wanted Abby to see the inevitable freak-out that he had.

Because he had.

Given that it was a Saturday and they only had the one ballet in production, they only did a half-day of rehearsals. Will left his phone at home and had spent the afternoon indulging the dogs in a long walk, trying not to think too much about the evening by laughing at his dogs' antics. Buster, especially, was a perfect distraction technique.

Of course, he had to go home eventually. He could hardly turn up in jeans and a plaid shirt if Hannibal was cooking dinner for him, even if it was his default. When he pulled his phone out, predictably, the women in his life had tried to blow his phone up. There was a, quite frankly, obscene number of messages left through the two apps on Will's phone and, when they hadn't garnered a response, the trio had reverted to phone calls. There were multiple missed calls from Bev, one from Margot and one from Abby. His voicemail was full to bursting.

He ignored all of the ones from Bev - most of which seemed to revolve around her telling him to 'tap that ass' - and listened to the one from Abby which sweetly told him to have a nice time and she'd be more than happy to dogsit if he'd changed his mind. Will then listened to the one from Margot as he perused his wardrobe and immediately took back every mean thought that he'd had of her as she instructed him on exactly what to wear. It was only when he was in the shower that he stopped in dawning horror and wondered when, precisely, Margot had gone through his wardrobe.

(~*~)

For all of his procrastination at home about whether to actually come or not, Will still found himself at the address that Hannibal had given him a good fifteen minutes before he was supposed to be there. Plenty of time to have a complete and utter freak out about the whole thing. Which, of course, he proceeded to do. His hands were sweating so much that he was amazed that he hadn't dropped the bottle of wine that he had brought (he really hoped the guy in the shop hadn't been lying when he said it was good). Why had he let those harpies of friends and colleagues to talk him into this? Nothing good was going to come of this. He was a walking disaster when it came to relationships and that was with people that he didn't really like. He really liked Hannibal. *Really* really liked him. That was why he didn't want to fuck this up. At least Mischa would be there to act as a buffer and hopefully stop him from doing something too stupid.

Finally, when he was no longer obnoxiously early, he stepped forward and, after checking that he had the right flat number, pushed the buzzer. It only took seconds for it to be answered but, even so, Will had to fight the urge to bolt. The intercom crackled and then Mischa's voice echoed out, sounding slightly tinny.

"Will? Is that you? Hi! Come on up."

The door released and Will grabbed it, holding it open. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. He marched straight for the elevator, opting for that hoping that being encased in a small steel box would stop him from making a run for it. Hannibal had rented out the penthouse suite of the building and Will couldn't help but stare around him as he stepped out. The door at the other end of the hallway was open, and seconds later, Mischa appeared.

Will took in her leather jacket, the way that she was checking her bag to make sure she had everything and froze. “Mischa. You look like you’re not staying…”

She swept forward and enveloped him in a hug and a cloud of Chanel No.5, kissing him three times on the cheek. “I’m sorry. Bev asked me out for a drink, and I thought it would be nice for you and Hanni to have some time to yourself.” She pulled back and fixed Will with a stern glance, although it was ruined somewhat by the look of mischief in her eyes.

“If I get back and find out that you’ve talked dance all evening, I will be *very* disappointed.”

“Noted.”

“Just make sure you do as I told you.”

Will mock-saluted her and watched as she disappeared into the elevator, the doors closing with one final shot of her wicked grin. Will steeled himself once more and walked down the short corridor and into the penthouse flat. The door shut behind him and Hannibal’s voice echoed through the space, carrying above the sound of classical music; Bach, if Will wasn’t mistaken.

“Mischa? Was that Will at the door?”

“Yes, it’s me.” Will swallowed heavily as Hannibal’s head popped round an alcove, his hair flopping in his eyes and wearing an apron.

“Will! Is Mischa not with you?”

“She was on her way out; she said something about meeting Bev?”

Hannibal didn’t look disappointed that Mischa wouldn’t be with them but, rather pleased. Something that his words confirmed.

“Strange, she never mentioned anything. Still, more for us to eat. And I can hardly complain about not having to share you with my sister.”

Will smiled and took a hesitant step forward. He wasn't going to read too much into that. He wasn't. “It smells good. Whatever it is.” It really did. Will ate reasonably well out of necessity as a dancer but, he wasn’t actually that good a cook. By the smell of it, Hannibal was a gourmet chef.

“Tenderloin of beef with salad and pan-roasted potatoes.”

“Wow. Oh! I brought wine,” Will awkwardly proffered the bottle, “I’m not sure if it’s any good. The guy in the shop told me that it was but…”

“This will pair very nicely with dinner. Thank you, Will.” Hannibal removed the cork swiftly and efficiently, setting the bottle on the side to breathe. “Dinner should be ready in approximately five minutes. Please feel free to take a seat in the living room in the meantime.”

“I’d rather watch you cook if that’s okay?” Will gave a self-deprecating chuckle, “I’m hopeless in the kitchen. If eating well wasn’t a requirement of the job, my dogs would be better fed than me.”

Will found himself mesmerised by the sight of Hannibal cooking. His movements were as graceful as when he danced and as skilled as a professional chef. Mischa really hadn’t been lying about Hannibal’s skills in the kitchen. And then, Will noticed what Hannibal was wearing.

Whenever Will had seen Hannibal, he had been wearing tracksuits or sportswear. Not just in rehearsals, but whenever they went to the pub, he was always in a variety of sportswear and tracksuits. Now, however? It was the complete opposite. Hannibal was in neatly pressed slacks and a ribbed sweater that had Will itching to see if it was as soft to the touch as it looked.

As Hannibal had said, dinner was ready in five minutes and Will was ushered through to the dining table. The plates, beautifully dressed, looked as though they belonged in a Michelin starred restaurant. To Will's delight, Hannibal sat close enough to him that their elbows brushed every now and then. They did discuss shop a lot, but the conversation didn't revolve solely around dance. How could it when Hannibal had cooked food like that? Hannibal waited until Will took a bite, his eyes fluttering shut and a truly embarrassing sound escaping his lips, before he ate himself, looking rather smug. All too soon, the food was finished and they moved to the sofa with the rest of the wine.

As the evening progressed, Will found that they were incrementally gravitating towards each other. It was as though they were magnets slowly being drawn towards each other. They kept swaying together, eyes flicking down to look at lips. When they finally did kiss, Will wasn't entirely certain who made the first move, but he didn't really care. It was chaste but that didn't matter; they were kissing. He hummed happily and tilted his head slightly to get a better angle. Will could feel Hannibal's hand cupping his skull, thumb stroking through his curls as Will stroked his hands across Hannibal's chest. When Will pulled back, he chuckled.

"The women will be happy; I think they've been trying to matchmake."

"Mischa is many things, but she is not subtle. I have been aware of her machinations since she started."

"You knew? And you went along with it all?"

Hannibal stroked his hand down Will's cheek, "darling Will, of course. I would put up with far more if you were the reward."

Restraint went out of the window. Will lunged for Hannibal; there was no other explanation for it. This time, it was definitely not chaste. It was hot, wet, messy. Hands clutching, noses bumping and teeth clashing. It was everything Will had hoped for and more. He let Hannibal push him back onto the sofa cushions, tugging Hannibal down to blanket him with his body.

As their kisses turned slower, more languid, Will couldn't help but let his previous fears come to the surface. He pulled back and turned his head to the side, forcing Hannibal to nuzzle into

his neck rather than kiss him.

“Is this a good idea? We have to work together for the whole run; what if this doesn’t work out?”

Hannibal paused but didn't withdraw. “I don’t know. But I do know that I don’t want to stop.”

“Me neither.”

This time, it was Hannibal's turn to do the lunging, pressing Will further into the cushions as he kissed him passionately.

(~*~)

The two of them, curled up asleep together on the couch, were utterly oblivious to the sound of Mischa tiptoeing quietly into the apartment in the early hours of the morning and standing over them. Finally, she had been starting to wonder if any of their matchmaking attempts would ever be successful.

She covered them carefully with a blanket and had to cover her mouth quickly to stop the ‘awwww’ from being too audible as Hannibal wrapped his arm tighter around Will, who made a soft sound. She couldn't resist snapping a quick photo to send to the group chat with Bev, Margot and Abby. This was why these two needed them; if it hadn’t been for the women in their lives, these two would still be dancing around each other, no pun intended.

In between flirting that evening, she and Bev had discussed how useless the two men were. Mischa had seen her brother in relationships before and, whilst some of them had been reasonably successful, none of them had been quite right. They either hadn’t been from the dance world and thus complained about how much time Hannibal spent at the theatre or in rehearsals. Or, they simply were more interested in his money - his inheritance – and his fame than anything else.

Will, however? Will was perfect.

Will didn’t give a damn about money or fame. He had plenty of both himself and all but shunned them. He was down to earth and he understood the dance world. He also understood Hannibal. Mischa had certainly never seen her brother so smitten with anybody before. And, even better, Will seemed just as smitten. Mischa liked that. She liked the fact that Will was only really interested in dance, his dogs and Hannibal even better. Plus, she liked the people that he surrounded himself with; Bev and Margot and Abby. They were good people and that said a lot about Will.

She took another look at the way that they were cuddled up together. The way that Hannibal’s arms were wrapped around Will and his nose buried in Will’s neck. The look of total relaxation and comfort on Will’s face, the way that he was clutching Hannibal’s hands where they were wrapped around him.

She had the feeling that she might be having to wake them up in the morning. She was glad that she had said yes to this project when Hannibal had asked her. Not only was she having

fun dancing, but she'd met a gorgeous woman and, finally, managed to fix her notoriously picky brother up with someone. Hannibal had better make her his famous protein scramble for breakfast as a thank you.

Act Three

For all of his fears and experiences of previous relationships, Will discovered that he wasn't as horrible at them as he had thought. Then again, maybe it was just a relationship with Hannibal that he didn't suck at. It just seemed so much easier than it had been with any of his previous lovers. He wasn't really sure why. Will certainly hadn't changed himself or any of his behaviours but, instead of being frustrated - as others had been - Hannibal seemed charmed. He didn't care that Will had a whole pack of dogs. That Will preferred to spend time by himself when he wasn't in rehearsals. That Will wasn't functional in the morning until he had drunk at least half a pot of coffee. He accepted Will as he was; sassy, grumpy and sarcastic as fuck.

Will had been worried that, working together and attempting a relationship as well would be too much, that they would end up sick of each other pretty damn quickly. But, it hadn't happened as of yet. It helped that they didn't spend every single second together when they weren't in the studio. Will still had his dogs to look after and Hannibal wasn't overly fond of the pack, as Will referred to them. Abby looked after them on the nights that Will stayed with Hannibal, but otherwise Will returned to his own home every night. It didn't seem to matter that, in many ways, they were like chalk and cheese. While Will liked spending his downtime quietly with his dogs going on long walks and fishing, by contrast Hannibal was a social animal. He liked surrounding himself with people, going out to galleries and the theatre. To Will's amusement, considering that Hannibal seemed to live in a series of increasingly battered sportswear when he was in the rehearsal room, when he went out he selected his clothes from an extensive collection of exquisitely cut three piece suits, some of them flashy almost to the point of obscenity.

Hannibal was also becoming notorious for throwing dinner parties for the company. Garnering an invitation to dine at Hannibal's was becoming the most sought-after request. Having eaten Hannibal's cooking, Will wasn't exactly surprised; he'd never tasted anything like it and, if he didn't know better, he would say that Hannibal was a professional chef, not a dancer. Will had a standing invitation to dinner - as did Bev, Margot and Abby - but he had yet to take Hannibal up on it. After all, spending time with Bedelia and Anthony Dimmond outside the studio was hardly an enticing prospect. Besides, why would Will put himself through the torture of having to be sociable, when Hannibal would bring him the leftovers every day without fail? Then again, if Anthony continued making eyes at Hannibal, then Will was going to be forced to make an appearance, just so that Anthony understood once and for all that Hannibal was very much taken. That was a whole other can of worms though.

There was also the sex, which was both frequent and fantastic. Will had had similar fears about the sexual component of a relationship as he had been about a relationship as well. It wasn't as though he disliked sex; he just worried that he was bad at sex. Certainly, the sex that he had had with previous partners had been okay but not amazing. There definitely hadn't been any mind-blowing orgasms. Not like there were with Hannibal. Will had never shied away from sex in his previous relationships, but he had never been able to enjoy it as fully as he wanted to. Considering that Will was a dancer – and a world-class one at that – he struggled with sex. Not in how to do it - he was perfectly aware of the mechanics – but in

being hyper-aware of his body and his own self-consciousness. He just never felt comfortable or relaxed enough to let go and just enjoy himself. Until Hannibal. There was something about him that set Will at ease. That allowed him to lose his inhibitions and actually enjoy sex. And they were definitely enjoying sex. Hannibal had this way of pleasuring – worshipping – Will until he was boneless with pleasure. They had christened everywhere in both of their homes and, courtesy of Hannibal's masterful skills of persuasion, a changing room and their usual small studio at the rehearsal venue. Will had no doubt that they would end up doing the deed in as many places as Hannibal could convince him to as soon as they moved into the theatre.

So, the sex was fantastic. The food was almost better than the sex and Will was actually happy in a relationship as well as his professional career, possibly the most incredible thing of all.

There was just one big problem. The elephant in the room. The thing that Will tried not to think about too much but couldn't avoid completely. What happened to this thing - this relationship - with Hannibal when the production run finished? Will was still officially contracted to Jack's company an 80% of Hannibal's work was in Europe. The prospect of a long-distance relationship was hardly an enticing one and, besides, who said that Hannibal even wanted anything beyond the production run when it ended. Will knew of a considerable number of dancers who managed to make long-distance relationships work thanks to the technological wonders of Skype and FaceTime. However, Will did not think he would be one of those success stories. It was a bloody miracle he was doing okay with a relationship in person, adding technology and distance into the equation was just asking for trouble.

Yet, for all Will's pessimism, it was hard to believe that Hannibal's interest would end with the production run though. They hadn't gone as far as actually saying 'I love you' but Will didn't think that there was any doubt about how either of them felt. He knew that he'd never fallen for anyone like he had fallen for Hannibal. He was pretty certain that he never would again. Which at least meant that, when this whole thing inevitably ended - as a large part of Will expected, Will would be spared the total and utter humiliation of everyone knowing and either being falsely sympathetic or knowing it would happen, or both.

That wasn't to say that they were keeping things quiet out of embarrassment or anything like that. It was more that they wanted to keep things private; they didn't want their whole relationship to become the property of the company. Neither did they want news to slip out and become fodder for the ballet gossip sites - trash such as that run by Freddie Lounds - and for speculation to take over and or become synonymous with the production; if it wasn't successful, then undoubtedly there would be those - Freddie - to claim that it was because the leads were more interested in sex and each other than the steps.

There were those who knew of course - Mischa, Bev, Margot and Abby - and neither Will nor Hannibal begrudged them that knowledge. Will was a little concerned that they were maybe a little too invested; Abby had let slip a comment suggesting that they had a group chat dedicated to Will and Hannibal's relationship. While it was a little creepy, Will couldn't deny that their approval meant a lot. He still could have done without knowledge of that chat group, however.

Basically, all it boiled down to was the fact that, for the time being, Will was embroiled in a relationship that was the epitome of domestic bliss. It was the kind of relationship that celebrities sold photos of to trashy magazines. At least, it was when they were staying at Hannibal's rental. No-one would want to buy photos of Will's place with its plaid throws covered in dog hair. Will and Hannibal may be like chalk and cheese in their interests when it wasn't to do with dance, but they both wanted exactly the same things from a relationship. Someone who understood their world, the life that they had chosen. Someone independent who was happy to occupy their own space, to take time to themselves and not live in each other's pockets. They wanted someone to cuddle with on the couch in an evening, someone to converse with and someone to make love to.

That was what they had found, and Will intended to hold onto it with both hands for as long as he possibly could.

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One thing became very apparent to Will as opening night loomed ever closer and that was the fact that, despite the certitude that both the dancing and his burgeoning relationship with Hannibal were both pretty much perfect, Will's mental health was anything but. It wasn't solely to do with the ballet, but it was certainly influenced by it.

Will had never been supremely confident in his abilities, never one of those egotistical principals where critiques rolled over them like water off a duck's back. Neither was he one of those dancers who lived in fear of the critic's reviews. Will always wanted to dance to the best of his abilities for the other dancers around him. He'd always had more empathy than the average person; it was part of what made him such a good partner. However, it also made other aspects of his life more vivid and hard to deal with. So, the closer they got to opening night, the more stressed Will got.

There was a lot resting on this performance for all of them. The production had been both a little scandalous and controversial when it had first been performed. An all-male version of Swan Lake had never been conceived, let alone successfully brought to fruition. Everyone had said that Jimmy and Brian were crazy for leaving Jack's company and taking such a gamble. That Irene Komeda had more money than sense for backing them and that they were crazy in choosing Francis Dolarhyde as their Swan. Their doubters had all been forced to retract their comments when it became both a commercial and critical success. Now, there was a weight of expectation. Could they pull it off a second time?

Jimmy and Brian had had a handful of successful productions since that first Swan Lake and they needed to prove not only that they hadn't made a bad decision in reviving it, but also that Jimmy's choice to 'make it gayer' in his words, hadn't been a misstep. Hannibal had to prove that he was capable of stepping into and filling Dolarhyde's shoes, something that Will had no doubt of. As for Will, he had to prove that he wasn't just another male soloist. That he was capable of more than a few tricks and being a leaning post for his ballerina. They all had to prove that the hype and the buzz surrounding the production lived up to the real thing. It was a lot of pressure and there was no wonder that Will was nervous.

The only thing was, Will's nerves were manifesting in the strangest of ways. Mostly in the form of nightmares, although they were nothing like any nightmare that Will had ever had

before. Will had never been the most solid sleeper but this was ridiculous. He couldn't sleep through the night without having at least one, sweating through his shirt and soaking the sheets, jerking awake and sitting bolt upright panting for breath.

Swans and oh so many feathers. It felt like the whole of his dream world was made of feathers. Not merely the traditional white swan feathers but black ones as well. Like the tutu the ballerina portraying Odile would wear in Act 3. The type of black that had a blue/green sheen to it. All interspersed with the white feathers. Hundreds, thousands, millions of them. So many that he felt as though he were choking on them. Suffocating. Those were the dreams that woke him up.

And then there were the other type of dreams.

The ones where beautiful swan men climbed out from underneath his bed - sometimes from out of the bed itself - to seduce him. Despite the swan man's amorous intentions, there was somehow a sense of menace that lingered and left Will unsettled when he woke. Sometimes the swan man had Hannibal's face, sometimes his face was blank. In truth, he wasn't sure which he found more disconcerting. Both certainly left him feeling disorientated when he awoke. On a particularly bad night, one where the swan man had Hannibal's face, it was all he could do to not flinch away from his lover.

What he didn't understand was why this was happening now, why this production had precipitated them. It was hardly the first time that Will had done Swan Lake, nor the first time that he had taken the role of the Prince, whether he be called that or Siegfried. So, why was it now that Will was having such vivid dreams? Nightmares? Which were they? What was it about this production that resonated with him so much?

All Will could hope for was that his mind calmed down soon because otherwise he wasn't going to make it to opening night.

~*~

Will wasn't really sure where he was going, just that he had to keep moving. It was as though he was disassociating, not really in his body or aware of what was going on.

"Will? Is that you?"

The words slowly started to penetrate the fog surrounding Will. There was a woman speaking. Who was she though? Did she sound worried? Why would some strange woman be worried about him?

"Will. WILL!"

Will gave a start as hands grabbed onto him and gave him a slight shake. He blinked several times and gave his head a shake, the world around him slowly coming into focus. He definitely wasn't at home anymore. But where was he? He forced himself to focus, recognising things as he did so. He was at the theatre, at Jack's. How the hell had he got here? The last thing that he remembered was going to bed at home, Buster sneaking onto the bed and curling around Will's feet.

“Will? Are you with me?”

And then he realised that Alana was stood at his side, looking concerned. Alana? What was she doing here? Where was he? Jack’s? The sun was shining and … what time was it?

“Alana?”

“Will, are you okay? I called out to you several times, but you didn’t respond. What are you doing here? I thought you were rehearsing at the studio across town. Where are your shoes?”

“We are. Rehearsing, I mean. I … I don’t know how I got here. Or where my shoes are.”

Will concentrated on his feet to avoid looking at Alana’s face; he knew exactly what it would look like. His feet were bare. He hadn’t put shoes on, and they were cut and bruised, covered in dirt. Shit. Jimmy was going to have a fit; how was he supposed to dance on them? As if it wasn’t bad enough that he was having strange dreams of swans and feathers that had him sweating through his shirts and the bedding, now he was sleepwalking as well.

And not just your usual sleepwalking around his place. This was extreme sleepwalking. How had he managed to get here without someone else stopping him, checking that he was okay? Why hadn’t one of the dogs woken him up? Had they tried and Will just hadn’t noticed? Was this the first time it had happened? Hannibal hadn’t mentioned anything but, then again, they didn’t spend every single evening together.

Why couldn’t life be easy?

“Are you supposed to be in rehearsal this morning?”

“Huh?” Will looked up when Alana shook his shoulder.

“Will, are you supposed to be in rehearsals this morning? Are they going to be expecting you at the studio? Is there someone I can call? Or I can take you to the hospital…” the reluctance in Alana’s voice with the last statement was audible.

Will forced himself to focus, thinking about the schedule. He hadn’t stayed at Hannibal’s last night. Or had he? Was that the reason the dogs hadn’t woken him – because they hadn’t been there? And then he remembered. He hadn’t slept at Hannibal’s the previous evening because they were starting the day with rehearsals for Act 1, so Hannibal wasn’t needed until lunch time and Will was trying not to get too dependent on Hannibal. Trying not to get too used to having him around. Was it best for Will to go to the studio? Given how prominent a role he played in Act 1, they were definitely going to be expecting him and there was going to be no way to hide what had happened. He couldn’t go to the hospital; they would probably call a psych consult and not let him back out.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly nine am.”

Okay, so it wasn’t as bad as it could be. Will wasn’t late for rehearsals so, in all probability, no-one would have noticed his absence. However, there was no way that he was in a fit state

to get to the studio by himself. And he didn't want to worry Hannibal unduly. He wasn't going to call Abby, Bev would go all mama bear on him and he definitely wasn't going to call Mischa because she would undoubtedly rat him out to Hannibal. That left one option. He was pretty certain that she could be relied upon to remain calm and not overreact. He couldn't believe that he was thinking this, but he was grateful to Bev for adding him to that group chat.

"Can you call Margot? I think her number is in my phone?"

"Of course, I can." Alana took the phone and Will tuned out as he heard her start to speak.

Once she had returned his phone, Will was aware that Alana was still talking to him, but he wasn't in any fit state to really listen to her. Instead, he focused on his breathing and took small comfort in the sound of the familiar voice. Had he been completely aware of what was going on, Will would undoubtedly be far more uncomfortable than he already did. He and Alana hadn't exactly been on the best of terms since their kiss, but they had muddled through and made it work. He had the feeling that he felt more awkward about it than Alana did; she had seemed interested several times before they had actually kissed. Had they not been partners, Will may have pursued something but, even then, he had never felt comfortable dating partners. Now, Will was in a relationship with a man. And not just any man but Hannibal Lecter.

He was fully aware of his hypocrisy. That having always said he wouldn't date his partner, he was not only doing that but with his male partner as well. Hannibal. Oh god, what was Hannibal going to say about all of this? Will had, somehow, managed to downplay the dreams that he had been having but that wasn't exactly going to work now, was it? How was he going to hide this? Did he want to hide this? Was Hannibal going to change his mind about dating Will when he found about this? He hadn't exactly signed up to date a basket case, after all. And that stray thought sent Will spiralling in his thoughts, his breathing coming faster and faster.

"Will!"

Will had barely processed hearing the cry before Margot was throwing her arms around him. The contact grounded him, and he allowed himself to sink into her embrace. He may only have known her since the production run had started, but he felt comfortable with her. There was a connection there, a silent understanding but none of the history with Alana.

"Breathe with me, Will. That's it. In and out. Nice and slowly."

Will did as instructed, feeling his breath slowly start to return to normal. As if he was still fighting through a fog, he heard Margot introduce herself to Alana and ask what had happened. Through all of it, Margot's arms remained tightly wrapped around him, one hand slowly carding through his hair.

Will still wasn't completely with it, disoriented from the experience of sleepwalking and terrified about what all of this meant, but he could see that there was something between his two friends. There was something in the way that Alana and Margot were looking at him that told him maybe Margot wasn't going to be all that upset about Bev's interest in Mischa.

Maybe, when he had got passed this and was feeling more like himself, he could do some matchmaking of his own. But then Margot was ushering him into a cab and sliding in next to him, taking hold of his hand and anchoring him somewhat as she barked instructions at the driver.

As they sped off, he could have sworn that he saw a lurking flash of red, a very distinctive red. But, it was only for a split second and he still wasn't totally with it. Maybe he was imagining it. After all, what would Freddie Lounds be doing there at that time in the morning?

(~*~)

Will should have known that Margot wouldn't keep her mouth shut and not called Hannibal. Even his threat to keep Alana's number from her had done no good whatsoever. She had simply smirked and responded that she had Alana's number already, that Alana had given it to her at Margot's request while they waited for the cab. She had also remarked that his threats would be more effective if he didn't look like a particularly pathetic puppy.

In the end, Hannibal arrived at the studio mere minutes after they did, dressed in his usual sportswear, hair flopping in his eyes and looking the most frazzled that Will had ever seen him. In fact, there was a whole welcome party waiting for them. Jimmy and Brian were there, along with a worried looking Bev and Abby. There was also a man there that Will didn't recognise. Will had barely managed to get the cab door open before Hannibal was there, running worried hands over Will's face and pressing a multitude of little kisses over his face, muttering away in a mix of Lithuanian, English and several other languages that Will didn't completely recognise.

When he finally pulled back enough to let Will out of the car, Will only managed to touch his foot to the tarmac before he hissed in pain. That was it, Hannibal had swept him up in a bridal lift and was carrying him inside. Will simply wrapped his arms around Hannibal's neck and buried his face in that familiar chest, trying to block out the shocked gasps when the others caught sight of his feet.

At Jimmy's direction, they went in an opposite direction to the main studio where class and rehearsals would take place. Brian broke away at that point, ostensibly to take charge of both although Bev and Abby both hovered anxiously, rather than following him, despite his pointed glances and exorbitant throat clearing. Will did his best to give them a reassuring smile but, judging from the way Abby shook even harder, he had the feeling that it came out as more of a grimace.

"I'll be okay, I promise. Just go dance and we'll let you know what's going on."

Neither looked convinced, but Abby let Bev tug her towards the door. When they got to the door, Bev turned and stabbed a threatening finger in Will's direction, "you'd better keep your promise or I'm totally going to kick your ads when you're looking less like a kicked puppy."

Will gave a somewhat wet laugh at that, and didn't miss the way that Hannibal's arms tightened around him. The room was clearly set up as a doctor's office, all white and sterile, for all that it was essentially a cupboard. There was an examination couch set up along one

side and Hannibal made for that, setting Will down on it and staying close when Will clung to him, unable to stop himself. As soon as the door was closed behind them leaving them in privacy, Jimmy and the strange man were stepping forward.

"Will, this is Dr Abel Gideon. He's a doctor that we've had on retainer before for our productions. He's going to check you over and make sure that there isn't anything too serious. You won't be taken to hospital unless it's absolutely necessary. Okay?"

Will nodded and watched, a little warily, as the other man stepped forward. "Hi, Will. Is it okay if I call you Will? As Jimmy said, I'm Abel Gideon and I'm a doctor; you can call me whatever you want. Now, what I need for you to do is tell me what hurts the most and what happened, as much as you can."

"I … I'm not sure what happened." Oh but Will hated how that made him sound.

"Then let's start with the easy question. What hurts the most?"

Well, Will could answer that question at least. "My feet."

"Right, let's start there then." Gideon pulled on a pair of gloves and started to examine Will's feet, palpating them gently, manoeuvring them back and forth, asking Will where they hurt the most and using a pair of tweezers to extract bits of gravel and twigs. As he worked, his hands deft and gentle, he managed to coax Will into revealing that he had been sleepwalking barefoot. That Will wasn't completely sure how he had ended up at Jack's theatre. That Will had been suffering from nightmares for a couple of weeks now and they were just getting worse, not better.

This was what Will hadn't wanted to admit to in front of Hannibal - and certainly not in front of Jimmy - hadn't wanted to appear as though he were crazy. To give him credit, Hannibal didn't run away screaming, but he did tense up behind Will while he couldn't even look in Jimmy's direction. Jimmy had hand-picked Will. He could have chosen any male principal in the country, but he had picked Will for some unknown reason. Was he regretting his decision now? When Gideon was satisfied, he slathered Will's feet in antiseptic cream and bandaged them in gauze.

"I'm well-aware of how you dancers treat your bodies and I won't deign to tell you what to do. You know your body best and I am well aware that you will push yourself back before you're completely ready. However, I do insist that you take the rest of the day off. Take some painkillers and let your body rest. After that, it's up to you when you return to dancing." Gideon pulled the gloves off with a snap and got to his feet, "I'm not going to force you to talk to a professional about your nightmare, but I do suggest that you talk to your partner at least. Irrespective of when you come back to dancing, I want to see you in three days' time to check that they're actually healing and, if you're still sleeping badly then, I want you to tell me so that I can prescribe something. If you need anything else in the meantime, Jimmy has my number."

"Thank you." Will studiously looked at his bandaged feet, secure in the safety of Hannibal's arms around him, until he heard the click of the door shutting and then Jimmy's voice, his hand hovering above Will's arm before touching him gently.

“Will? It’s okay. This changes nothing. You have the full support of myself, Brian and the company. We will do everything that we can to help you. Hannibal’s going to take you home now and I don’t want to see you back here until you feel ready. Okay?”

Will merely nodded, beyond grateful for Jimmy’s words but incapable of responding to them. Instead, he just surrendered himself to Hannibal’s embrace, aware that there was a conversation going on that involved him but not really paying attention to precisely was being said. He just trusted in Hannibal to look after him.

~*~

As Will had expected, Hannibal looked after him to the point of doting.

He couldn’t remember anyone ever looking after him like this, not even when he was a child. Hannibal had carried him from the medical couch to the cab and then from the cab into Hannibal’s penthouse where he had ensconced Will on the couch. From that point, he hadn’t allowed Will to do anything. If he wanted a drink or food then Hannibal brought it to him, if he was bored then Hannibal entertained him. Mostly, Will dozed with Hannibal lounging behind him on the couch, arms wrapped tightly around him as some instrumental music played in the background, Bach perhaps?

After a light lunch of homemade chicken soup, Will talked. Reluctantly at first, but it got easier the more that he spoke. He relayed everything to Hannibal, in detail. He detailed the dreams, the nightmares. The night sweats. The sleepwalking. How he wasn’t sure how far the sleepwalking extended. At the end, when he had finished talking, he wasn’t entirely sure what to do. Hannibal hadn’t moved, had simply listened with his arms wrapped around Will but, neither had he reacted at all.

“My poor love. Why did you keep this to yourself? Why did you not tell me?”

Will shrugged, his eyes darting all over the place, as he refused to make eye contact with Hannibal.

“Will, mylimasis, please. Look at me.”

Will did so, reluctantly. What he wasn’t expecting was for Hannibal to cup his cheeks in his palms, dotting a multitude of butterfly kisses over Will’s face.

“This does not change anything. I wish you had told me, but a part of me can understand why you didn’t want to. Do not fret. The sleepwalking is, admittedly, a little concerning but can be dealt with.

Dr Gideon was willing to help, and you can stay here so that something like today doesn’t happen again. We can find solutions to all of those things.”

Will gave a somewhat wet laugh, “I wish I had your confidence."

“And that is why you have me. We shall deal with this together. All will be well, beloved. That, I promise you.”

“Yeah?”

“Indeed.” Hannibal tilted his head and pressed a gentle, almost reverential kiss, to Will’s lips. “Message Bev. Your phone hasn’t stopped buzzing all afternoon and they are undoubtedly worried about you. Tell them to come over for dinner after rehearsals.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Is there anything that you would like to request?”

“Jambalaya?” Will loved all of the (often) predominantly European dishes that Hannibal cooked, but tonight he was craving familiar comfort food.

“Your wish is my command.”

(~*~)

His mind put to rest by his confessional conversation with Hannibal – at least temporarily – Will spent the afternoon on the couch, dozing on and off, lulled by the sound of quiet classical music with Hannibal humming along and the familiar smells of jambalaya cooking.

He awoke from a nap that he didn’t remember falling into by Hannibal gently moving him so that he could slide behind him on the couch, enveloping Will in his embrace. Will roused himself just enough that he could reciprocate the embrace when Abby threw himself at him. He spent a couple of minutes soothing her and reassuring her that he was alright, that he would be able to dance in a couple of days. As he did so, he noticed that it wasn’t merely the girls that had joined them as he had expected.

“Not that it isn’t nice to see you all but why are you all here? Jimmy? Brian?”

“We have some bad news for you, Will.” Bev held out her phone for Will to read, the screen showing an instantly recognisable website. “Nick found it an hour or so ago; he gave Abby the heads up.”

“Whatever you want to do, Will, the company will back you. If you want to go to the police, I’ll drive you there myself. We will support you one hundred percent. I don’t regret my decision casting you.”

Jimmy’s words did nothing to mollify Will. If anything, they increased his concern. Neither did the rather wild look in Brian’s eyes or his expletive-ridden muttering. Looking down, he felt cold as he read the title, there in stark black and white for any number of people to see.

'Will Graham; going method or simply crazy?'

He barely read the next section but read enough to get the gist; Freddie Lounds had been there that morning and, contrary to the headline, hadn’t wasted any time in speculating that Will was potentially having a mental breakdown, much like his character. Will’s ears were filled with white noise. He had no doubt that his friends and colleagues were talking to him. Hell, he could feel Hannibal’s chest moving beneath his ear, but he couldn’t concentrate on

anything but the rush of fear and anger that was threatening to overwhelm him. This was a disaster. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Will threw the phone to the other end of the sofa and buried his face in Hannibal's chest and screamed out of sheer frustration.

Act Four Scene One

Will drifted through the rest of the evening in a daze. He knew that everybody had stayed although they had been careful to give him his space and not crowd him. He ate mechanically, not even Hannibal's beautifully cooked jambalaya penetrated his fog. Will couldn't stop replaying the words of the headline.

'Going method or simply crazy?'

He had been so sure that he had seen Freddie that morning but had hoped he had been wrong. What he didn't understand was how she had known that he would be there especially given that he wasn't currently working with Jack's company. Will supposed that someone could have seen him and tipped her off; Will was a recognisable face on the dance scene, after all. However, with the exception of Matthew Brown, Will had always got on with his partners and dancers in the company. He may not be the most sociable person in the world but neither did he think he'd pissed off anyone enough for them to tip off his whereabouts to Freddie fucking Lounds, especially when he clearly wasn't in a good state of mind.

Unfortunately, that left one option that Will didn't really like. Someone was following him. And not just following him, but stalking him. The list of possible people w\as short, just two names. Will had no doubt that Matthew was capable of doing something like this. Not because he thought that it would bring Will to him, but because Will wouldn't be with him and this would possibly cause ructions with Hannibal. Will hadn't heard anything further about Matthew since the police had turned up at the studio to arrest him for putting glass in Hannibal's ballet shoes. Given the way that he had still been screaming when the cops arrived, there was no way that he wouldn't have been charged for his actions. However, Will didn't know if he had been bailed or what; something that he would have to check with Jimmy and Brian. There was also the chance that he hadn't given up on following Will, merely that Will was so wrapped up in Hannibal that he hadn't noticed. Will was loathe to point the finger at Matthew with no genuine proof but, quite frankly, he wasn't interesting enough for Freddie to be trailing him of her own volitions; somebody had to have tipped her off.

Will didn't sleep well, if at all, that night although for the first time in at weeks it wasn't visions of swans and feathers that kept him awake. He knew that Hannibal would be unhappy that Will hadn't woken him, but this was something that he needed to decide without Hannibal. So, instead of sleeping, he took comfort in the weight of Hannibal's arm lying heavily across his waist and mulled over his options. By the time that dawn broke, he had made his decision. When he felt Hannibal stir behind him, Will hesitantly informed him of his decision, knowing that it was the right one when Hannibal rolled him over and kissed him soundly. As Hannibal made breakfast for them both, Will phoned Jimmy.

Jimmy arrived at the same time that Hannibal left and he wasn't alone. With him was a blonde woman that looked somewhat familiar to Will. She noticed him staring and held out a hand in greeting,

“Miriam Lass, pleasure to meet you, Mr Graham.”

“Please, call me Will. Sorry, you look familiar somehow.”

“I was a protégé of Jack and Bella Crawford. Quite a few years before you joined the company. I had a bad accident and the dance world was no longer for me. I went into law instead. Jimmy seems to think you’re in need of my services.”

That made sense. Will had probably seen a photo of her at Jack and Bella’s at some point. He listened as Jimmy made them coffee and Miriam laid out the facts as she understood them. Will had to hand it to her, she had a handle on everything.

“As far as I see it, it’s highly likely that if someone was following you then it was Matthew Brown. He was bailed after what happened to Hannibal but we’d be foolish not to mention it to the police. As far as Freddie Lounds is concerned, we definitely have grounds to accuse her of libel, which I have every intention of doing. At the very least, she’ll have to pull her article by the time I’m finished with her if not pay you a rather handsome fee. Anything else that comes up we’ll deal with as and when.”

Will nodded. “I’m good with whatever you think best, I just want this dealt with and over as soon as possible.”

He was almost taken aback by the shark-like grin on Miriam’s face.

“Oh, don’t you worry, I’ve been waiting to take Freddie Lounds down for quite a while. I’m going to enjoy this.”

~*~

Three days later, Will met Abel Gideon for the second time, this time at Hannibal’s apartment where Will had been living since his episode. Between them, Bev and Abigail had been looking after the dogs and the day before, Mischa had colluded with them and snuck Winston up for a visit, which had been the best medicine that Will could ask for. They hadn’t been successful hiding it from Hannibal judging from the way that he had sniffed disdainfully at the air when he returned home, but the lack of further comment implied he wasn’t truly bothered. Instead, he had kissed Will hello and got on with preparing dinner.

Hannibal had not been happy at the prospect of Will staying at home alone while he went to rehearsals. In fact, not happy had been a massive understatement. There had been a lot of cursing in a mix of languages along with a lot of banging of kitchen equipment. Unfortunately for him, it had been unavoidable. They were not close enough to opening night to warrant the understudy going on in Will’s place, but neither could they stop rehearsals. Hannibal had only been mollified by the fact that Jimmy had made arrangements for his assistant Randall to stay with Will, at least until he had been seen by Gideon again. There was nothing that Randall couldn’t do at the apartment as well as he could from the little office he kept at the studio. He was also there to ensure that Will actually rested and that he didn’t walk unless it was absolutely necessary, ensuring that Will’s feet actually had the chance to heal.

Injury was normally the worst thing to happen to a dancer. It was something that you expected, something that always loomed just around the corner, lurking and waiting to turn their lives upside down. It was almost inevitable. Given the amount of physicality involved in their jobs, the amount of abuse that they put their bodies under, there was the possibility of sustaining an injury at any point. With that being the case, Will considered himself lucky that he hadn't really been hit by injury before. There were the little things – most dancers had suffered from stress fractures at some point or other not to mention bruises and sprains, pulled muscles – but then there were the horror stories. Lifts that had gone wrong and ended disastrously for the ballerina. Will remembered one story about a principal male in London who had snapped his Achilles tendon on stage and the entire auditorium had heard him sobbing in pain in the wings. Will might have slept walked in his bare feet but, to his relief, the injuries that he had sustained had been relatively minor. No one doubted that he would be back in rehearsals soon and back on stage for opening night.

It helped that Brian and Jimmy were both forward-thinking. Will wasn't sure if it had come from them or from someone else in the company, but they had live-streamed the rehearsals to him so that he felt as though he was still involved. He could still hear the discussions, be part of any changes that were made. It was very strange seeing Anthony Dimmond dancing his role and Will had been surprised by the stab of jealousy that had spiked through him at seeing Hannibal dance with Anthony, but it did help him feel involved. Even so, he was pleased to see that Hannibal didn't have the same spark with Anthony, that he did with Will. Even so, by the time that Gideon turned up after three days, Will was going stir crazy.

"Mr Graham, nice to see you looking more with it."

Will barked with laughter at the doctor's unusual greeting. "Did anyone ever tell you that you had an atrocious bedside manner?"

"Why do you think I'm on retainer with a ballet company rather than working in general medicine? Dancers are hard-headed enough to deal with my sparkling personality. Speaking of which, let's see how badly you damaged yourself."

Aware that Randall was hovering in the background, no doubt waiting to feed progress back to Jimmy and Brian, Will gestured Gideon over to his spot on the sofa where his feet were propped up on the coffee table. He sat stoically, wincing and hissing now and then, as Gideon removed the bandages and probed at Will's feet.

"I have to say Mr Graham, I'm impressed. You're the first dancer that has actually followed my instructions. I'm going to rebandage them and I want you to stay off your feet as much as possible for the rest of the day but they're healing well. I see no reason why you shouldn't be back in rehearsals by the weekend."

Out of the corner of his eye, Will could see Randall pull his phone out and lift it to his ear, no doubt relaying the good news to the studio. Will didn't hear what he said because Gideon chose that moment to start speaking to him again.

"And the nightmares? Have you slept?"

"Yes?"

“That sounds as though you’re keeping things from me, Mr Graham. May I remind you that it is generally considered to be bad form to keep things hidden from your medical practitioner? Now, have you been sleeping? Do I need to prescribe you sleeping aids?”

“No, I’ve been sleeping better. I think.”

“Good, I’ll take that. And the nightmares?”

“Still there but different. I don’t know how to describe them. Not as terrifying? I’ve been talking about them with Hannibal.”

“Well, that’s something. If that changes, you know where I am. I want to see you once more in two days’ time, make sure that walking on them hasn’t done any damage but I have no doubt I’ll be signing you off as clear for work.”

~*~

Will was positively eager to return to rehearsals. Five days at home doing nothing had been torturous. He was beyond grateful that he had been able to watch the rehearsals, otherwise he would have gone crazy. Still, there was nothing quite like being able to dance. He just hoped that five days without dancing wouldn’t affect his performance too much. He had been doing as much stretching and work with therabands as possible, trying not to lose flexibility or strength. Logically, he knew that five days wasn’t enough to undo decades of training and discipline, but the fear was always there.

It was strange pulling up to the studios with Hannibal. The last time that he had been here, Will had been almost totally out of it, disoriented and in pain. He also hadn’t exactly been lucid from his nightmares. Now, he wasn’t exactly nightmare free, but having spoken about them, the fear had faded somewhat. Gideon had given him the all-clear the previous day, stating that not only was Will as healed as he was going to be but that Gideon was impressed by how well-behaved Will had been by actually resting. as Hannibal had made dinner, Will had run through some basic barre exercises of tendus and pliés, testing out how his feet felt under Hannibal’s watchful eye. Will was fully expecting to be in pain by the end of the day but was looking forward to it.

What Will wasn’t expecting was to walk into the studio to find the entire company there and giving him a round of applause. He had been hoping that they would be early enough that he could be established without a fuss, but it seemed as though he had been pre-empted. He appreciated their show of support but that didn’t stop him from wanting the ground to open up and swallow him. Thank fuck for Brian Zeller. With the briefest of nods, he strode forward, breaking the applause.

“Alright, enough slacking. Left hands on the barre. Two demi’s, grand plié, forward port de bras, rise and balance. Repeat in second, third, fourth and fifth. Chilton.”

As Will took his usual spot in between Bev and Abigail, Hannibal watching him carefully from his own spot by Bedelia and Mischa, the sense of rightness settled over him. Jimmy and Brian had chosen him for this. He could do this and nothing and no one was going to stop him from being on that stage with Hannibal on opening night.

Act Four Scene Two

Being back in class brought some normality back into Will's life, set everything to rights again. As dancers, they did have time off – the theatres were usually closed for the summer – and Will would take the dogs away and go fishing but, even then, he always danced every day. Even if it was just a basic barre in the kitchen using the back of a chair. He had only had five days away from the studio, but those five days had been torturous.

Rehearsals also didn't seem to have been too badly affected by Will being away. He was aware of the couple of small changes that had been made, thanks to being able to watch the rehearsals via video link, but the biggest thing that Will relished even more than dancing was dancing with Hannibal. It was still a heady, blissful experience that Will couldn't get enough of.

He hadn't really thought too much about what he was going to do once this production was over, mostly because he didn't want to, but he knew that he was going to have to. After all, dancing with nobody else other than Hannibal wasn't exactly an option. However much Will wanted it to be. Jack had given him a sabbatical to dance with Jimmy and Brian's company for this production only. With the sitz and the dress a mere week away, the production would be over before they knew it. Once Swan Lake was over, Will would be expected back with the company he was a permanent dancer with.

That wasn't necessarily a bad thing, as he did like dancing with the company – and Alana – but he had had a taste of what else was out there and it was tempting. Essentially, Will just had to figure out the options that were available to him. Maybe it was time to speak to Jack about how feasible it would be for him to start guesting with other companies now and then. Plenty of other principals did it – holding guest spots with a number of companies – why shouldn't Will join their ranks?

With the sitz, the dress rehearsal and opening night less than a week away, they were now running the ballet from start to finish for stamina and finesse. While some of the dancers – particularly Will, Margot and Mischa – were used to dancing full length ballets and had the ability to both conserve their energy whilst simultaneously dancing to the top of their game, there were a number of dancers who were brand new graduates or who were contemporary dancers and simply not used to long stretches of time on stage. One of said dancers was Bev, although she was considerably more experienced than many of the other dancers in the company. As he watched Bev dance, Will was struck by the fact that he hadn't spent nearly enough time with her recently. At least not just the two of them. Or Abigail. He'd been spending so much of his time with Hannibal since they became a couple and he missed the time that they had spent together.

He needed to rectify it.

Besides, he wanted to know what was going on between Bev and Mischa. Will was astute – he always had been – but not necessarily when it came to people. However, he would have to be blind, deaf and dumb to realise that not only was Bev looking at Mischa Lecter with

interest, but that Mischa was looking back. Before Marissa's incident – before Mischa's arrival – Will could have sworn that Bev and Margot had a thing going but whatever he had seen had disappeared the second that Mischa Lecter stepped off a plane from Paris and into the studio.

Bev didn't take much convincing when Will suggested beer and burgers. It was going to be his last blow out before the production began. After this night with Bev, it would be nothing but tea, minimal caffeine (that was a true killer), plenty of protein, sensible carbohydrates, vegetables, as much water as he could drink and a strict regime of supplements. So, Will was going to enjoy the forbidden foods while he could. Hannibal's cooking was phenomenal but, well, sometimes a man just needed grease and fat rather than gourmet cuisine. Hannibal hadn't exactly been thrilled with Will's decision – he had mentioned ossobuco or something similar – but he had grudgingly agreed that Will needed to spend some time with his best friend. He had even offered to feed the dogs.

Yeah, Will had managed to find a god amongst men without even really trying.

~*~

Will was arguing one particular combination with Zeller, Hannibal and Jimmy looking on in amusement, when Bev came to collect him at the end of rehearsals for their dinner.

"As scintillating as this conversation sounds, I am here to steal my sassy little beignet away for the evening. Hannibal, I promise to return him not too badly damaged. Zee, you're wrong, Will's right. The developpé will look better on the other leg."

There was an immediate outburst of sound, Jimmy's laughter, Hannibal's confusion and Zeller's outrage. Will could do nothing but shrug helplessly as Bev towed him away with an unrepentant "Laters!"

She was still cackling when they sat down in the dive bar that they had first gone to with Margot, rather than Kade's. They didn't speak as they perused the menu, but Will didn't waste any time once their orders had been taken and beers delivered to their table.

"So, you and Mischa…"

"How about you and Hannibal?"

"No dice. You have a WhatsApp group dedicated to our relationship – which is still creepy as hell, by the way – and besides, you know everything about Hannibal and I."

"Look at you – 'Hannibal and I' – proper grammar and everything," Bev groused as she took a long slug from her beer. "Fine, what do you want to know?"

"I'm just confused, I suppose. I thought you and Margot had something going on. I could have sworn you were flirting with each other for the first couple of weeks rehearsals, but then Mischa arrived, and you were all over her. It wasn't quite as though Margot didn't exist, but she seems okay with it though, so maybe it's none of my business. I just … thought you might want someone to talk to that wasn't Abigail, y'know, a teenager."

“Shit. Are you sure you’re not a cinnamon roll? That was almost but not quite too sweet.”

“Screw you. For that, I’m stealing your onion rings.”

“And the Southern sass is back.” Bev paused as their food arrived and allowed Will to steal a couple of onion rings before she smacked his hand away. “Hands off, beignet. My food.”

Will held his hands up in the universal sign of surrender, watching as Bev proceeded to stuff her face with fries, pointedly not answering Will’s question. He had learnt that Bev wouldn’t respond until she was ready, so he took a big bite of his burger, relishing the flavours bursting on his tongue. He’d demolished about a third of it when Bev finally spoke.

“You’re not totally wrong. About me and Margot.”

“Margot and I,” Will couldn’t resist and got a sharp kick under the table in response.

“Do you want the details or not? Because I’ll withhold them if you don’t stop talking.”

Will responded by stuffing his burger in his mouth, which gained him an approving nod from Bev.

“As I said, you weren’t totally wrong about *Margot and I.* We were flirting for the first few weeks of rehearsals; it’s pretty much our default setting and has been ever since we met. Which was not on this production. I used to be in the ABT Studio Company when I was in my late teens.”

Will choked on his burger. He had known that Bev had classical ballet training and more than most of the dancers on Swan Lake, but this was major and not what he had expected. Over half of the current principals and three-quarters of the soloists in the American Ballet Theatre had started in the Studio Company. They had produced dancers in the ranks of nearly every single major dance company in the world. For Bev to have been part of that and to have walked away from it…

“What? How? Why?”

“What am I talking about? How did I manage to get in? Why did I leave?”

“More why you left. I mean, you know I think you’re a great dancer. Fuck, how did I not know that you danced with the Studio Company? Did you go through the school before?”

“No. I auditioned and got a place but, well,” Bev shrugged, “you’ve heard me talk about my family. I’m close to them and moving away at the age of eleven to live in New York by myself? That didn’t sound fun to me. So, I stayed home. Made a four-hour round-trip three times a week to take class with the best teacher in the State and did as many summer intensives as I possibly could. I auditioned for the Studio Company and stayed with them until I was nineteen.”

“And that’s how you met Margot?”

“That’s how I met Margot. The Company was on a European tour; London, Berlin, Paris, St. Petersburg, Rome. Mostly I remember Paris. I learnt a lot in Paris,” Will laughed as Bev leered.

“But you didn’t stay with them? Didn’t move onto ABT?”

“No. They offered me a place but, I don’t know. I got the feeling that I would never really get much further than the corps. Maybe a few soloist roles but I was never going to make it into the higher echelons. Plus, you know, they put you into a couple of big ballets with the main company and I just got bored. I didn’t want endless years as a Willis or a swan, I wanted something exciting. So, I left and joined a company that had more of a contemporary leaning. I don’t regret it.”

Will could understand that. After all, wasn’t that the way that he had had been feeling? Wasn’t that why he had jumped at Jimmy’s offer?

“That wasn’t the only time you’ve met Margot though, was it?”

“No. We didn’t see each other for a few years, but we ran into each other on various intensives, were sometimes in the same city on tour. Vail Festival. We always hooked up and had a bit of fun when we saw each other again and after a while, we started to keep in touch in between meetings. This is the longest that we’ve ever been together in the same place. So yeah, we flirted, and we had fun. The sex was definitely better than that first time in Paris.”

“And then Mischa arrived.”

“Then Mischa arrived,” Bev drained her beer and signalled for another round from the waiter, “seriously, what do they put in the water in Lithuania? Seriously, they don’t make them like the Lecter’s over here. Probably a good thing; none of us would get anything done. I don’t know. I mean, Mischa walked into that studio and it was everything that I felt for Margot but ramped up ten times. She’s funny, intelligent, gorgeous, an incredible dancer and amazing in bed. The whole package. It’s bloody irresistible.”

Will didn’t necessarily want to ask the question, not when Bev was talking about how happy she was, but he knew that Bev was waiting for it. “And what about when the run ends? She’s a premier danseur at Paris Opera Ballet, they’re rumouring her for a promotion. Opera Garnier is a long way from Washington.”

“We’re going to try and make it work. I have an audition with a London company – Ballet Black – and, well, Eurostar is much more convenient than a trans-Atlantic flight. It’ll work or it doesn’t. if it doesn’t, I haven’t lost anything.”

“I wish I had your confidence,” Will muttered.

Bev clearly felt sorry for him because she offered him the basket of onion rings again. “You and Hannibal? What are you going to do when the production finishes?”

“I don’t know. The subject hasn’t come up and I haven’t had the balls to bring it up. I don’t know if I want to hear what Hannibal would say. Besides, I’m still contracted to Jack and his

company."

"You won't know unless you ask but, if you want my opinion – and you're getting it regardless – I think you'll be pleasantly surprised. Hannibal is so in love with you; I think he'd offer you his heart on a plate if you asked him to."

"Bev!"

"What? I'm just saying that man is smitten and any company in the world would snap you up as a guest artist, especially once this production gets on stage. Just think about talking to Hannibal."

"If I promise to think about it, will you stop talking?"

"Buy me dessert and you have yourself a deal."

"Dessert? This close to a show?"

Bev narrowed her eyes at him, "yes. You and I both know that we'll burn it off in rehearsals and besides, I don't see a need to deprive myself when I look this good."

"Dessert it is."

"Good choice, beignet."

~*~

The sitz probe was always the worst part of a production. A vitally important and necessary part of a production, but a tedious one, nevertheless. At least to everyone outside of the tech team. It didn't matter how much time was allotted for the sitz; it always took longer than planned. It was always tricky for dancers especially because they didn't get to dance straight through as they would. There was a lot of hanging around while the different departments that made up the technical team figured out how to make the directors plans a reality. It made it harder for the dancers who had to be even more careful about avoiding injury than they normally were.

This production wasn't one of the most complicated that Will had ever danced in – that title went to one of the bigger productions with the really elaborate sets – but there were a couple of tricky moments and a number of sets. And then there was the swan scenes with dry ice which always had even the most experienced dancer and performer a little apprehensive.

The tech team that Jimmy and Brian had assembled was good. They were some of the best freelancers around; all experienced, used to working with dancers and it showed. They also weren't assholes. Sometimes you got the feeling the techies were going slower just because they could. This team clearly weren't doing that. In fact, they were only about twenty minutes behind schedule which, for a sitz, was a fucking miracle.

Will didn't appear until the second scene of act three and so he stood in the wings, watching the action on screen as he waited for his entrance, wearing as many layers as possible to keep himself warm. The auditorium was empty with the exception of Jimmy, Brian, Molly and the

other ballet mistresses. In the pit below the stage were the musicians, presided over by the conductor Tobias Budge, all of them grumbling with more than a few of them reading, some others playing cards while the brass had decamped to the local Starbucks and were waiting for a text to recall them.

As he looked out into the auditorium though, Will could see someone else enter the theatre and take a seat. They weren't sat with Jimmy and the others, but by themselves, further back in the stalls which was why they caught Will's attention. There shouldn't be anybody else in the theatre. Some companies did open dress rehearsals where they invited patrons – and sometimes press – to watch but Jimmy and Brian didn't work like that. As Will started to try and find one of the backstage crew to start to get whoever it was removed, they shifted position and Will stilled, seeing something familiar in the movement.

He squinted, craning his neck as he tried to figure out who they were and whether he knew them. Will was still trying to make them out when Margot came off-stage, grabbing some water before she had to make her next entrance.

"What on earth are you doing, Will?"

"There's someone in the stalls watching. It almost looks like Alana Bloom, but I can't…"

"Alana? Oh good, she wasn't sure if she'd make it or not."

Will stared at Margot in shock. "You were expecting her? Alana Bloom?"

"Why so surprised?"

"I didn't realise that you knew her that well. I didn't know you knew her at all!"

Margot gave an unapologetic look, "whoops, that's my entrance!"

"Margot!"

(~*~)

It wasn't until after Act Four – the most exhausting of the whole ballet for Will – that he was able to speak to Margot. The dancers would get some notes from the coaching staff, but the dress rehearsal was the following day and that was a bigger priority for the dancers than the sitz so most stuff would wait. It was only really Will and Hannibal who appeared in the final act along with Bedelia and the corps, so Bev, Margot, Mischa and Abigail had gone to sit in the auditorium once they had changed. Once Will had changed out of his dance gear into his usual outfit of well-worn jeans and a flannel shirt, he went out to meet them, Hannibal materialising at his side wearing his own typical studio gear of mismatched sportswear.

Bev was playing with Mischa's hair as she had started doing more recently while Mischa talked animatedly with Margot. What was truly surprising for Will was the way that Margot was leaning against Alana as the latter spoke to a very awed Abigail. The very familiar way that would hint at more than mere acquaintances.

"Will!!"

“Hello Alana.”

Will accepted the hug and kiss from Alana, giving her a kiss on the cheek in response. “I thought I saw you in sat here but I wasn’t sure. What are you doing here?”

“Margot invited me. I’m going to be away guesting in San Francisco for most of the production and I wanted to at least see some of it just in case I don’t make it to a show. You looked good, partner. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you dance so well.”

Will blushed, unable to help himself, at both Alana’s comment and the squeeze of agreement that Hannibal gave his waist. “It’s Jimmy’s choreography – and Hannibal.”

Alana gave him a knowing look, “I have a feeling that it’s a little more than that, but I’ll spare you the grilling. For now.”

“I won’t be so kind.” Will arched an eyebrow at his usual partner, “how do you know Margot so well? I asked her earlier, but she didn’t answer. I didn’t think you knew each other.”

“I gave her my phone number when she came to pick you up when … you know. I asked Margot to keep me up to date with how you were doing. She messaged me a few times, we went out for coffee and it went from there.”

“So, you’re…”

“Dating? Yes, Will.”

Will huffed a laugh. “I think we probably all owe Jimmy gift baskets given how many couples he’s had a hand in creating with one production.”

“Is it all Jimmy though?” Bev piped up. “I mean, you and Hannibal, yes. However, Mischa coming was all Hannibal, or even Marissa. Margot and Alana are all down to you so, I’m not convinced. Maybe Jimmy doesn’t deserve all of the gift baskets.”

“Perhaps dinner at our place will suffice in recompense? Ms Bloom? You are more than welcome to join us, should you wish.”

Hannibal spoke up and, for a moment, Will couldn’t help but wish that he hadn’t. It may have not been the dress rehearsal but the sitz had been stressful enough and Will had kind of hoping for the evening to himself and Hannibal with maybe Winston for company but that was it.

“Please, it’s Alana. And, if you’re sure, that would be wonderful.”

“Hannibal. And yes, you’re Will’s usual partner, are you not? I’m sure you have plenty of stories to share…”

What were the odds that Will would be able to just take Winston for a walk and not come back? Hannibal and Alana getting to know each other was dangerous … for him! Then again, maybe if Hannibal and Alana got on, Will would have someone else in his corner when – if - he potentially renegotiated his contract with Jack

~*~

When the morning of the dress rehearsal dawned, Will awoke with the unmistakeable feeling that he needed some space. The previous evening had been pleasant enough – more than – but with three couples plus Abigail at dinner, it was all too much for Will. Every dancer had their rituals and Will's rituals had a tendency to revolve around solitude. Normally, the night before a dress rehearsal – depending on how big and complex the role – he would go for a long walk with his dogs or even a fishing trip. A dinner party had never factored into his preparations.

That wasn't to say it hadn't been a pleasant evening.

It had.

Despite his concerns, the evening had been a success. There had been no friction whatsoever between Margot and Bev. Indeed, despite their previous relationship, the two of them were perfectly happy as friends and more than secure in their current relationships. He was also pleasantly surprised by how well Hannibal and Alana had got on. Part of him had been a little concerned about it but, he had been more than a little mollified by the way that Alana had whispered how perfect he and Hannibal were for each other as she left. In a strange moment of a prescience, she had also stated that if he needed help with Jack, she would support him.

As much as he had enjoyed the evening, it was so far from his usual ritual that it had left Will oddly disoriented and he had slept poorly, even wrapped in Hannibal's arms.

In an attempt to regain his equilibrium, Will had requested the morning to himself, something that Hannibal hadn't complained too much about granting him. So, while Hannibal cooked himself an elaborate breakfast and read some obnoxious psychology journal that had arrived for him, Will took himself and Winston out for a long walk. The fresh air and presence of Winston had precisely the effect that Will had been hoping for and, by the time that he arrived at the theatre, he was relaxed and perfectly ready for what lay ahead.

The theatre was buzzing already by the time that Will arrived. He dodged through the many bodies milling around backstage to check in with Jimmy and Brian before retreating to his dressing room to get ready. This was a ritual that he had done many times in dressing rooms the world over and he had it down to a fine art. With this particular production, it was simple. There was no wig, he just had to run a brush through his curls and his make-up took him about 15 minutes. From there, he got into his costume and pulled sweatpants over the top, warming himself up before he made his way to the stage.

For the dancers, the dress rehearsal was easier than the sitz in many respects. There wasn't the focus on the technical aspects, it was all about the dancers. They weren't standing around for long periods of time, running the risk of injury. The dress rehearsal was perhaps most stressful for the dressers. This particular production may not have as many quick changes as a classical production, but practising the costume changes was still a necessity, never mind making sure that they could dance without hindrance. For Will, much like his hair and makeup, his costumes were some of the simplest he had danced in. That didn't mean that he could sit back and take it easy though.

In terms of dancing, Will knew that this production was one of the best that he had ever been involved in. He had no doubt that, at least with the public, this production was going to be a success. The critics were always going to be a different matter but there was never any understanding the way that a critics mind worked. This production was the one that he felt the most invested in in years. He actually didn't think that he'd been this invested in a production since his debut. He was involved on so many levels; emotionally and technically to name just two.

It wasn't all Hannibal, not entirely.

Yes, Hannibal was a large part of it. At least the emotional aspect of Will's dancing. But for the rest of it? He was feeling challenged for the first time in years and he was revelling in it. He wasn't bored. He was eager to get to the studio every day and he really didn't want to return to his previous existence. Whether Hannibal was in his life or not – and Will really hoped that he was, which meant that they needed to have a conversation sooner rather than later – Will couldn't go back to the same run of the mill repertoire that he had been doing.

Speaking of Hannibal. Will had never expected to be so turned on by the sight of Hannibal in his swan prince get up. During the warm-up class, Hannibal was still in his usual mishmash of sportswear so the first time that Will saw him dressed as The Swan was onstage in the middle of the dress. He had been prepared for it. Or at least, he thought he had. As it turned out, Will really wasn't ready for Hannibal with that ridiculous bone structure highlighted by the stark black and white makeup and that ridiculous rug of chest hair that Will loved so much, on clear view. And that was without even taking the leather trousers from Act Three into account.

Through professionalism and sheer bloody-mindedness, Will managed to keep his focus on the performance throughout the entire thing and even through Jimmy, Brian and the ballet mistress giving notes. Once they had been released though? He wasted absolutely no time dragging Hannibal back to his dressing room to show just how much he appreciated Hannibal in his Swan costume.

He was so engrossed in showing said appreciation, that he missed his phone lighting up with a missed call from Miriam Lass.

Apotheosis

When he finally checked his phone the following morning – the day of opening night - and saw that he had a voicemail from Miriam, Will was incredibly tempted to pitch his phone off Hannibal's balcony or ignore it altogether. He was very pleased that he had missed her call the previous evening because she would have ruined an inordinately pleasant time.

Phone calls - and voicemails - from Miriam were not a good thing. They meant Freddie Lounds or Matthew Brown. Miriam had swiftly dealt with Freddie Lounds and her article questioning Will's mental health had been swiftly pulled down and she had been sued but there had been very little else that they could do. Pouring himself a strong cup of coffee, he steeled himself as he dialled Miriam's number, putting it on speaker so Hannibal could listen in.

"Miriam, hi. I'm sorry I missed your call."

"Will, don't worry about it – I know it's a crazy time for you and I won't keep you long. I want to keep you updated but I don't want you to worry about anything; it's all under control. Matthew Brown released a video last night, a very long and rambling video about you. It was hosted on Freddie's site. He made a lot of claims about how you only got the role because you slept with Jimmy, made some insinuations about your relationship with Bella Crawford and warned that you're creating a reputation for sleeping with your partners. There was mention of a kiss with Alana Bloom as well."

"Fuuuuck." Will pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling Hannibal press closer and squeeze the back of his neck reassuringly.

"Will, I promise you. This is under control. I've already spoken to the webhosting team in my official capacity as your lawyer and it's in the process of being taken down as we speak. Freddie is currently cooling her heels before being interviewed by the police and, giving everything else he has done so far, Matthew is waiting for a psych eval. Yes, there might be a little bit of talk but there is no way that anyone could see that and believe him. You need to focus on tonight; that is the most important thing."

Will huffed out a deep breath and scratched Winston's head, who had come over to investigate if his human was okay. "Thanks Miriam, I really appreciate it."

"My pleasure, I'm glad that I could deal with Freddie. Break a leg for tonight. I'm coming to see a show later in the run and I'm looking forward to it."

"Thanks, Miriam."

~*~

Working on Jimmy and Brian's Swan Lake had been completely different to any other production that Will had worked on since he had joined a company so, it stood to reason that his normal pre-show routine had changed as well. Usually, the company would be rehearsing

at least one other ballet whilst performing a different one. That meant a full day of daily class, rehearsals, gym workouts and appointments with the physiotherapists. Only working on one production meant a slightly different day.

Will had been determined that the whole situation with Matthew wouldn't throw him off. It helped that Miriam had been so quick off the mark the previous evening. So, he had gone about his slightly modified routine. Hannibal had cooked them breakfast ensuring that it contained optimum amounts of protein, fats and carbohydrates for the day ahead. He had then proceeded to pack multiple Tupperware containers with a variety of snacks for the day ahead as well as dinner.

They hadn't discussed what their normal routines were and Will saw no point in asking now. Whatever Hannibal did would work for him as an artist, Will simply had to adapt his usual routine and do what would work for him. So, he went for a run with Winston, leaving Hannibal at home going whatever it was – when Will had left, he had been listening to some obscure opera in a language that Will had never heard of whilst using various parts of the kitchen as a barre. When he got back, Will did a mixture of stretching exercises and Pilates before sitting down with Winston and a set of headphones to go through the choreography. This was one part of his routine that he didn't change. Even if he was rehearsing three other ballets at the same time, he would find the time to sit down before he went on stage to go through his choreography with the music, even if it was just marking it with his hands.

They left Hannibal's apartment after an early lunch and with plenty of time to get to the theatre for company class. Unlike the usual full class that they would do, company class pre-performance was shortened and designed specifically to ensure that the dancers were suitably warmed up for the performance and not too tired for the upcoming show. As usual, it was the normal mish-mash of clothing with some of the corps already with their hair ready for the performance, while others looked as though they had just rolled out of bed.

With class over, it was time for make-up, hair and costumes. Out of all of them, the swans probably had the most complicated make-up, although Bedelia, Bev, Margot, Mischa and Abigail all had reasonably complicated hairstyles at various points during the production. Most dancers had been doing their own make-up since their first show as children and all had their preferred products to create the expected look for the stage but there was always at least one hairdresser in the building to help create the elaborate styles – or even put on the wigs – needed for different productions.

Given that Will's look was so simple, he didn't have to get started straight away. On his dressing table was a small stack of post that had arrived for him as well as a few gifts. The majority of them were good luck cards. There was something from Jimmy and Brian, from Mrs Komeda and a couple of others who had followed his career for a long time. Alana's card came with a note saying that she hoped to make one of the later shows in the run and a new toy for Winston while the card from Jack and Bella said that they were looking forward to seeing the show that evening and a small tub of the weird herbal mixture that Bella made up in their kitchen that helped to warm up muscles. Only when Will had gone through them all and tucked them into his mirror did Will start to get ready.

Finally, hair done and make-up on, the base elements of his costume under a plaid shirt and the legwarmers that Bella had knitted for him, Will made his way to the stage. This close to the performance, it was mostly empty except for a few others. Mischa, Margot and Abigail were there, testing their pointe shoes on the floor. Mischa was actually taking a hammer to her shoes while Abi was sat with a lighter as she singed her ribbons to stop them from fraying. A couple of the corps were there, carrying out their own pre-show rituals. One of them actually looked as though he was praying and Will tried not to judge him too much; everyone had their own habits and things they had to do pre-show. Instead, he concentrated on himself and made mental notes on the couple of places on the floor that he needed to watch out for more than others.

Will was almost finished when Hannibal turned up. His hair was slicked back and the Swan's make-up on his face, but he was also in his Adidas trackpants and socks. It didn't make him any the less impressive. Will didn't stay for too long after that; it was far too easy to get distracted by Hannibal and that was the last thing that Will needed on opening night. He needed to focus on what was ahead.

As he left Hannibal on stage and walked through the theatre, Will heard numerous mutters of "Merde" or "Chukkas", as the various members of the company wished each other luck for the upcoming performance.

(~*~)

Being a performer was a strange beast.

You took on another persona, became another person for the duration of the performance. It was your job to make the audience believe you were that person. You drew them in so that they became part of the story. Made them leave convinced that they knew you yet still remaining an enigma.

It was a difficult job.

There were days when the last thing that you wanted was to go onstage but you did it regardless. When you put aside whatever was going on in your personal life, plastered a smile on your face and went onstage. Over the years, people had danced through heartache, heartbreak, injury, joy, sadness. When everything in their world was upside down, they danced on.

Some performances passed as though in a blur. Will was vaguely aware of everything that he did but it was as through a haze. During this performance, he was aware of absolutely everything. Every step, every movement. He knew exactly what had happened.

It was perfect.

Or as close to perfect as performances got; they were performers, there was always something that could be improved upon. Even so, Will knew that this was good. It was better than good. Maybe not perfect, but pretty damn close. Will knew that he had definitely never danced better and had certainly never had a partnership so successful on stage. He watched Hannibal dance from the wings and, while Will had thought that Hannibal *was* The Swan the

first time he saw him dance, in front of the audience, Hannibal took it to another level. The connection – the emotion – between them was palpable and it just kept their performance spiralling higher until the moment that the curtain dropped.

Will and Hannibal took their bows first. The noise coming from the audience was louder than Will had ever heard, and he had been popular ever since he had joined a company. They took the applause with solo bows and several together. Will couldn't help the laugh that escaped him as Hannibal took a knee, hand over his heart towards Will, the traditional prima ballerina's reverence to her partner. Nor could he help the words that spilled from his lips.

"I love you."

Will blushed hotly as a smile split Hannibal's face and he got to his feet, murmuring "as I love you, my Will", before pulling Will into a heated kiss not caring that they were in front of an entire theatre full of people.

It was all they could do to tear themselves apart from each other for the rest of the company to take their bows.

With the corps having taken their bows, it was time for the featured roles. Anthony Dimmond and Bedelia. The princesses – Margot, Mischa and Abigail among them – receiving slightly warmer applause and a few shouts of 'brava' from the auditorium. Then Bev moved forward to take her own solo – and somewhat dramatic - curtsey and Will was pleased to hear her receive a few shouts and cheers of her own. And then Will and Hannibal were moving forward through the ranks to join the company and the noise in the auditorium swelled.

Will had performed in front of many appreciative audiences but this exceeded them all. You could never see much into the auditorium from the stage during a performance, something which had both positive and negative arguments. However, he could dimly see the first few rows of the stalls and every single member of them was on their feet. A standing ovation. This was more than they had hoped for. Will blushed as Hannibal brought their linked hands to his lips and pressed a kiss to Will's knuckles, the noise swelling even more.

They stepped back into the ranks, Will taking Bev's hand as Hannibal took Bedelia's and they brought the whole company forward to take two, three more curtain calls. And then members of the front of house staff were coming forward with bouquets of flowers. Large arrangements for Bedelia and Bev, smaller bunches for Margot, Abigail and Mischa. Will was more than a little surprised when two staff came forward with bouquets for Will and Hannibal themselves. It wasn't usually the done thing for male principals and soloists to receive flowers, at least not in the UK and America, although it was more common in Russia. Trust Jimmy and Brian to do things differently.

Hannibal led Tobias forward to take his bow, the man bringing his orchestra to their feet. Then Will moved to the wings, taking Jimmy's hand and leading him out onto the stage, while Bev did the same with Brian. Both of them looked slightly stunned by the response that they were receiving. There had been so much concern that resurrecting this production wouldn't live up to the original, but it seemed that they were unfounded. Jimmy gave a flamboyant bow while Zeller's was slightly more awkward. And then Jimmy was grabbing

Will and Hannibal up into a huge hug, pulling them forward with Brian, as the four of them took a bow together.

The whole company stepped forward and took one final bow before the curtains swished closed.

First nights were always special but this one was going to be permanently etched on Will's memory.

~*~

Will hated gala receptions.

They required him to be far too sociable. At the end of a performance, dancers were full of adrenaline from the show and needed to decompress but this was the worst way of decompressing as far as Will was concerned. All of these people wanting to congratulate him, wanting to know how he prepared for a role such as this, acting as though they knew him. It was exhausting. He disliked making small talk at the best of times and absolutely hated it here, especially when you considered that a fair number of these people were critics. The only thing that he wanted to do – more so given their moment on stage – was to go home with Hannibal. However, given that he was one of the two leads in the production, he didn't really have a choice over whether he attended or not. The only consolation would be that Hannibal would be there with him. So, Will had satisfied himself with stealing several long kisses from Hannibal before they had, reluctantly, separated to clean off their make-up and dress back in clothes more suitable for the reception.

The room was already bustling when Will and Hannibal arrived hand in hand, but the noise level suddenly dimmed before it exploded into rapturous applause. As people surged forward, all wanting to talk to Will and Hannibal, they found themselves separated. The only consolation was that somebody had arranged for Will to be handed a tumbler of whisky rather than one of the champagne flutes making the rounds. Will felt his face ache from his forced smile and the tedium of answering the same questions over and over again. Finally, a gap opened in the crowd and he saw two people who brought a genuine smile to his face.

"Bella! Jack!"

Will allowed Bella to press kisses to both his cheeks before wrapping him in a huge hug, only releasing him when Jack elbowed her gently out of the way so that he could shake Will's hand. Even then, Bella was back in his space, cupping Will's face. She was probably the only person that he would accept so much physical contact from other than Hannibal or maybe Abigail and Bev.

"We are so proud of you, Will. You've always been an incredible dancer, but I've never seen you dance like that. You were phenomenal. And Hannibal? You make quite the partnership on stage and a beautiful couple. You'll have to bring him over for dinner at some point."

"Bella! You make it sound like you're my parents and I'm bringing home my first boyfriend!"

“Will. We are very aware we are not your parents. However, you were so young when you joined the company that yes, we feel a little parental towards you. That means while we feel incredibly proud of you, we can also want to embarrass you horribly in front of your partner.”

“Bella. As much I’m sure you would like to continue to embarrass Will horribly in front of all of these well-known critics, there are other people who would like to speak to him. Will, congratulations. You did great. I think we need to have a chat at some point about what repertoire you’ll do going forward, but that can wait a couple of days. Go.”

“Thanks, Jack.”

Reluctantly, Will left the Crawford’s behind and continued through the reception. All of those dancing featured roles were present, and Will caught sight of them as he moved through the crowds. Bedelia and Anthony both seemed to be having reasonably serious conversations when he caught sight of them, and both Margot and Mischa seemed happy enough. Then again, he expected that Mischa would have had a fair amount of experience with these things. He couldn’t see Hannibal or Abigail, but hopefully they were both okay. In his bid to avoid a small knot of critics, Will managed to let himself get caught and pulled into a conversation.

“WILL!”

Will turned from where he had been talking to Mrs Komeda – one of the only people here he could truly tolerate other than the Crawford’s – at Abigail excitedly shouted his name and just about managed to catch her as she threw herself at him. She was chattering away at the speed of light and Will couldn’t catch anything that she was saying. Hot on her heels was Hannibal. Luckily for the both of them, Mrs Komeda smiled indulgently and moved away to talk to Jack.

“Abby, *Abigail.* Slow down, I can’t understand a word of what you’re saying.”

“Bella Crawford just congratulated me on my performance, Will. *Bella Crawford!!* She said I have a lot of potential as a ballerina. Can you believe it? And Jack Crawford has offered me an audition. He said that there are a couple of corps spots open and the possibility of some solos.”

“Congratulations, Abigail. That’s wonderful news. I’m glad Jack spoke to you; if he hadn’t, I would have asked him to audition you.”

“Really, Will?”

“Of course. I’m sure that Alana would have vouched for you as well.”

“Do you think so? I still can’t believe I had dinner with her the other night at yours and Hannibal’s apartment; I’ve idolised her for so long.”

“I know so.” Abigail’s news had brightened Will’s evening. He knew that Jack wouldn’t have offered up the prospect of solos if he didn’t already intend on offering Abigail one of those places in the corps. That wasn’t Jack’s style. The idea of having Abigail around all the time certainly made moving back to Jack’s company a lot more palatable.

Now all he needed was to sort things out with Hannibal. Seeing another critic headed his way, Will sighed. That would have to wait though.

Coda

Will awoke to an empty bed and the scent of Hannibal's cooking spreading through the apartment. He didn't have a clue what time it was but judging by the tiny hints of light peeking around the edges of the heavy curtains, it was at least mid-morning. But, then again, that was to be expected given the fact that they hadn't stumbled into bed until the early hours of the morning. Will allowed himself to drift for a little bit, lulled by the comfort of the bed and the soft sounds of Hannibal elsewhere in the apartment. He was just debating whether to roll over and try to doze a little bit longer or get up when Hannibal took the decision out of his hands and nudged the bedroom door open carrying a laden tray.

"I had the feeling you were awake."

"I can't decide if that's creepy or sweet." Despite his words, Will tipped his chin up for a kiss, humming happily as Hannibal indulged him. "What's all this?"

Hannibal placed the tray on the bed, "breakfast. I'll just go and get the rest."

"The rest?!" Will looked over the tray which was full of bowls of fresh fruit, freshly baked croissants and Hannibal's famous protein scramble. "What else could there be?"

Realisation dawned when Hannibal came back in, a number of newspapers tucked under his elbow and two mimosas in his hands. Reviews. Last night had been the opening night of Swan Lake which meant that the press had been there and the morning after meant that the reviews were in. "Don't you think you're being a little peremptory pouring the champagne?"

Hannibal raised an eyebrow as he managed to get back into bed with a grace beyond what Will was capable of, dancer or not. "Not in the slightest. Do you?"

Will cast his mind back over the previous evenings performance and knew that Hannibal was right. It hadn't been flawless – few first nights were – but it had been pretty damn close. "No, I suppose not."

"There you have it. Now, breakfast first and then we shall see what they have to say."

For the first time since Hannibal had started cooking for him, Will barely tasted the food. He had no doubt that the food was as perfect as always, but he wasn't focused on it. All of his attention was on the pile of newspapers and the online reviews just waiting to be pulled up on Hannibal's iPad. If it weren't for the fact that Will knew his body needed fuel for the day, he would be tempted to go straight for the reviews. Finally, when there was nothing more than crumbs left, he made a grab for the papers, leaving the iPad to Hannibal.

Will held his breath as he started to read the first review. Roman Fell for The Baltimore Sun. He was notoriously difficult to please. He had also given them 4*. It was incredible. Roman had singled out Bev as a delight and complimented the male corps, while Abigail received mention as one to watch. However, the majority of his praise went to Will and Hannibal. It had been Roman who had once praised the partnership between Will and Bella Crawford and,

while he was never effusive, he praised the partnership between Will and Hannibal and marked them as a couple to watch in the future.

Will was delighted to see that the reviews were overwhelmingly positive. Yes, some of them mentioned the inexperience of the younger members of the cast but it wasn't in an overly critical manner. Will was especially pleased that Abigail and Bev both received a complimentary comment from Roland Umber, a well-respected critic from New York. He also gave the production 4*.

4* from Chiyoh.

5* from Peter Bernadone along with the comment that, whilst the role of the Swan had been created on Francis Dolarhyde, Hannibal had made it entirely his own and would be remembered for it.

And then Will came across a reviewer that he had never heard of before.

"Hannibal? Have you heard of a critic called Franklyn Froideveaux?"

"The name doesn't ring a bell. Why do you ask?"

"Because I think someone has a crush. I mean, he's nice enough about the production. He mentions me, Jimmy's choreography and the orchestra under Tobias but you? Well, it's gushing. Your technique, your stage presence, your *cheekbones*. Pretty sure you could just walk on-stage and not do anything and he'd still give you a 5* review."

"Hmm."

"What about the online reviews? How are they?"

"Overwhelmingly positive. Little mention of Matthew. 5* from Allegra Pazzi at Dance International, 4* from Georgia Madchen at Pointe – she also seems rather taken with you – and 5* from Randall Tier. I think we deserve those mimosas, don't you?"

The orange juice was freshly squeezed and the champagne was probably expensive enough that Will didn't want to think about how much it cost but, even so, he found he couldn't enjoy it as much as he wanted to. The fact that they had just read the reviews had brought with it a sickening realisation. The run had started and with it, the countdown had begun to when he and Hannibal would have to say goodbye to each other.

"Will? Is everything okay?"

Will forced a smile to his face, "of course. Why would anything be wrong?"

"Because you looked distinctly melancholic just now. Please tell me the truth."

"I suppose getting the reviews in made it real. We're only doing a six-week run. We've only got six weeks left together before I'm back with Jack's company full-time and you go back to Europe."

“My darling, foolish mylimasis.” Hannibal cupped Will’s face and kissed him gently on the lips, “whatever makes you think that?”

“I don’t understand.”

“You may have to return to Jack Crawford’s company, but I will not be returning to Europe. At least not permanently. I’ve been receiving invitations to guest with American companies for years, I’ve simply never seen the appeal. At least until now. I believe the commute between New York and Baltimore is very favourable.”

Will laughed delightedly. All of his worry for nothing. “We’re not expected anywhere until the pre-show class, are we?”

“Jimmy and Brian have requested a meeting with us prior to the class but we don’t have to be at the theatre for another four hours.”

“Good. Because I think this definitely deserves celebrating.”

~*~

The theatre was already starting to hum with activity when Hannibal and Will arrived. The dancers wouldn’t be arriving for an hour or so, the orchestra at around the same time that the doors opened to the public. Jimmy and Brian had ensured they had enough time for this conversation without Will and Hannibal having to miss the pre-show class or feeling rushed through their usual pre-show routines. All of the techies that they passed on their way to the room that Jimmy and Zeller had claimed as the production office nodded and congratulated them on the previous evening, Will and Hannibal smiling and thanking them.

They had barely passed through the doorway before Jimmy was throwing his arms around them, squashing them in an embrace. Zeller didn’t join in, but he did give them an approving nod and a handshake when he convinced Jimmy to let go.

“My two superstars! The reviews are amazing! The critics love you!”

Will blushed at Jimmy’s exuberance, not comfortable with the praise, while Hannibal acknowledged it, “if the critics love us, then it’s because of your choreography. We can only dance what we are given.”

“No, no, no. Pretty words, Hannibal but only you two could have interpreted those steps in that way. Only you could have invested so much emotion into the roles, convinced the critics and the audience.”

“Thank you, Jimmy,” Will spoke up, “that means a lot coming from you.”

“Great, because there was a reason we asked you here so early.”

Zeller came forward, perching on the edge of the desk. “You two might have been lounging around in bed all morning, but some of us have been working. We’ve been in meetings all morning.”

“This production has brought a whole raft of new donors out of the woodwork and other company directors have been phoning to get tickets to see some of the younger dancers. CV’s are starting to come in from dancers wanting to work with us. We’ve got the opportunity to try something we’ve wanted to for years and we finally have the opportunity to give it a go.”

“We still need to iron out the details, but we’re planning a big new production next year and we’d like you as our leads again. Not just for the rehearsal period and the performances, we’d like you to be involved from the beginning workshopping it.”

“It certainly sounds intriguing.” Will tried to keep his voice level, trying not to give away his excitement. This was precisely what he had been hoping for. The way that Hannibal’s hand gripped his thigh reassured him that Hannibal felt the same.

“What were you thinking of?”

“Something nice and controversial. Our take on another ballet great.”

Jimmy’s grin was almost blinding, while Zeller’s expression could best be described as wicked.

“How do you feel about Romeo and Romeo?”

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